"Making the world more open and connected": Mark Zuckerberg and the discursive construction of Facebook and its users

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Abstract

The dominance of online social networking sites (SNSs) sparks questions and concerns regarding information privacy, online identity, and the complexities of social life online. Since messages created by a technology's purveyors can play an influential role in our understanding of a technology, we argue that gaining a complete understanding of the role of social media in contemporary life must include qualitative exploration of how public figures discuss and frame these platforms. Accordingly, this article reports the results of a discourse analysis of Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg's public language, foregrounding the evolution of his discourse surrounding Facebook's self-definitions, the construction of user identity, and the relationship between Facebook and its users.

Keywords

Discourse, Facebook, identity, Mark Zuckerberg, social networking, users

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Introduction

The dominance of online social networking sites (SNSs) sparks questions and concerns regarding information privacy (boyd, 2008; Gross and Acquisti, 2005; Mayer-Schonberger, 2011; Solove, 2007), online identity (Ellison et al., 2006; Marwick, 2013), and the complexities of social life online (Baym, 2010; boyd, 2014; Van Dijck, 2013). A recent overview of SNS scholarship (Zhang and Leung, 2015) confirms an ongoing focus on exploring these issues among researchers, yet also revealed a strong methodological preference for quantitative approaches to studying social networking platforms, their users, and the various interactions between the two. Since messages created by a technology's purveyors can play an influential role in our understanding of a technology (Pfaffenberger, 1992), we argue that gaining a deeper understanding of the role of social media in contemporary life must include qualitative exploration of how public figures discuss and frame these platforms.

Accordingly, this article reports the results of a discourse analysis of Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg's public language from the platform's launch in 2004 to 2014. Discourse analysis enables an examination of Zuckerberg's language, understanding how it is not "simply a neutral means of reflecting or describing the world" (Gill, 2000: 172) but is instead "performative and functional" (Rapley, 2008: 2) and helps shape available conceptions of online social life. We do this through the use of a digital archive of Mark Zuckerberg's public utterances, *The Zuckerberg Files*.

While scholars have already used *The Zuckerberg Files* to provide insights into Zuckerberg's discussions of familiar issues like information privacy (Casilli, 2015; Cirucci, 2015; Segovia, 2015; Zimmer, 2014), sharing (Hoffmann, 2016), and openness (Hoffmann, 2014), our goal is to foreground the evolution of Zuckerberg's discursive constructions of important features of Facebook, focusing on Facebook's self-definitions, the construction of user identity, and the relationship between Facebook and its users. Facebook's self-definitions are important because they constitute part of Facebook's strategies for stabilizing the meaning and potential uses of the platform; user identity is important as it involves the construction of a subjective position relative to Facebook. Studying Zuckerberg's discursive strategies, then, offers insight into how Facebook and its users are situated or naturalized with regard to one another and also within a broader landscape of online platforms and SNSs.

Relevant literature

Discourse

Discourse is the use of language relative to social, political, and cultural formations—it simultaneously reflects and shapes social order (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999: 3) and it both enables and limits ways of "seeing" objects (Tuominen, 1997: 352). Discourse about technologies, in particular, plays a significant role in how technologies become part of our systems of goals, values, and meaning, inviting constant "social, legal, personal, and economic discussions that shape how that technology becomes incorporated into new ways of life" (Bazerman, 1998: 386). Sources of this discourse may vary—from discussions among friends and family to depictions in advertisements to articles in media

outlets—but are ultimately united by the specific technologies being "imagined, pro-jected, advanced, managed, coped with, or that [are] emergent in the world" (Bazerman, 1998: 385).

Certain kinds of actors are better positioned to influence messages about technology within conventional media outlets and shape the meanings that get attached to technol-ogy (Van Dijk, 1996: 85). Habermas (2006), for example, argues that institutional actors such as corporations are particularly influential "in the formation of public opinions and the distribution of power interests" (p. 419). Cukier et al. (2009) argue that corporations and special interest groups "enjoy privileged access to the media and are in a position to use professional techniques that often make them stronger than civil society actors" (p. 177). This is not to say that corporate or other institutional actors hold a monopoly on how technologies are understood, but they are in a position to leverage the power and reach of mass media to promote particular views of a technology.

Corporations often attempt to speak with one coherent voice about their products through press releases and other messages generated by key representatives, like CEOs (Cheney et al., 2004). These messages feed into broader discourses about a technology, working "to influence … beliefs and general assumptions held by the public" (Cheney et al., 2004: 89). For example, businesses can have specific arguments about a product's salient features within a press release that aims to influence the public's beliefs about that product. If picked up and transmitted widely, these messages can "play a central role in the hegemonic production and reproduction of perspectives on new technologies in our culture" (Stein, 2002: 173). It is for this reason that we pay careful attention to the lan-guage that Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook, deploys in discussing Facebook publicly. Importantly, no other voice has loomed as large as Zuckerberg's in the promotion and reproduction of Facebook as both an idea and a platform.

Discourse and social media companies

Compared to social media users, the discursive work of social media companies and their prominent figureheads has received comparatively less scholarly attention. Writing in response to boyd and Ellison's (2007) call for greater research into who uses social media sites, Beer and Burrows (2007) argue that focusing only on users overlooks, among other things, the rhetorical construction of social media phenomena (p. 523). In line with this argument, some researchers have examined the messages created by Internet and social media companies. Van Dijck and Nieborg (2009), for example, explore prominent Web 2.0 business manifestos, arguing that these texts commonly collapse producer/consumer categories in favor of "co-creation," eschewing details about how sites profit from user activity. Gillespie (2010) observes that online content purveyors must play a careful game in "positioning themselves to users, clients, advertisers, and policymakers, making strategic claims as to what they do and do not do, and how their place in the information landscape should be understood" (para. 1).

Scholars studying Facebook's rhetoric observe recurring themes of global online soci-ality. Freishtat and Sandlin (2010), for example, argue that Zuckerberg's language works to "give users the appearance of more control by simplifying and expanding the tools to manage the ever-increasing volume of friends' messages, links, photos and videos

online," ultimately "reconceptualiz[ing] privacy within a rhetoric of control" (p. 516). Similarly, Raynes-Goldie (2012) argues that Zuckerberg's emphasis on "openness" has entrenched the idea that Facebook is about radically transparent sociality rather than individual privacy. In a different vein, Payne (2014) argues that Zuckerberg's use of the term "sharing" works to depoliticize a complex field of social and capital relations, using the language of sharing and connection to more efficiently construct, police, and commodify users (p. 100). John (2012) argues that "sharing" often masks the commercial interests of SNSs (p. 169), and Van Dijck (2013) argues Facebook's ideology of sharing has undergirded "new legal rulings concerning privacy and [users] accepting new forms of monetization" (p. 46).

Collectively, this literature illustrates how Facebook's rhetoric draws on and feeds into a larger body of discourse surrounding the site, often reworking familiar concepts in ways that serve Facebook's interests. However, previous work in this area tends to focus on either SNSs broadly (and not Facebook specifically) or on one term (as with "sharing"). Consequently, we lack a broader account of how this kind of discourse changes (or does not change) over time in relation to specific platforms. Below, we offer such an evolutionary account of Facebook as captured in Zuckerberg's discourse.

Methodology

Data collection and preparation

The corpus for this analysis comes from *The Zuckerberg Files*, a digital archive of nearly all publicly available content spanning 2004–2014, representing the voice and words of Mark Zuckerberg in his professional capacity as Facebook's founder and CEO.[1] Launched in 2013 to "enable scholarly investigation of Facebook's philosophy of information" (Parry, 2013), the archive includes over 125 full-text transcripts and videos, blog posts, letters to shareholders, media interviews, public appearances, and product presentations featuring Zuckerberg discussing Facebook (the archive excludes Zuckerberg's personal activities, such as announcements of his marriage or photos of his dog). Items in the archive have been made publicly available to researchers in adherence to the "Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Scholarly Research in Communication" (International Communication Association, 2010), and can be accessed at www.ZuckerbergFiles.org.

For the present analysis, we downloaded all available text documents and transcripts from *The Zuckerberg Files* and imported them into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to facilitate the application of the coding scheme to the text corpus, differentiating whether a section of text was an utterance made by Zuckerberg or a question being asked by an interviewer (or other contextual text not attributable to Zuckerberg). The resulting data corpus contains 145 data files totaling over 114,000 words (three or more characters long) attributable to Facebook's founder and CEO.

Coding

We applied an initial descriptive coding scheme based on the following criteria: the business side of Facebook; privacy concerns; self-definitions (e.g. "Facebook is …"); the

platform's evolution or temporality; Facebook users, including advertisers, developers, individual users, politicians, celebrities, and businesses; technological features of Facebook; or "issues," conflicts, and controversies (such as responses to public outcries over platform changes or privacy violations). Furthermore, we used simultaneous coding, often applying more than one code to a given statement. As we proceeded through the application of the coding schema, we noted a number of second- and third-level codes were necessary but not present in the initial coding structure. After some discussion, these items were added to the coding scheme. These additional codes stemmed from particular instances of language present in questions or in the statements of Mark Zuckerberg (and thus can be considered as in-vivo codes). The final coding structure was derived both before and during data analysis and can be considered a "directed" content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

Below is an example exchange from the archive:

| Interviewer: | … how does the competition from things like Twitter, etc. change the way you view your business in the coming months and years? |
| Mark Zuckerberg: | Well, you know, there are a number of services online that help people connect with people around them and share information with them, and, you know, Facebook offers a number of ways for people to do this. It's by far the biggest place on the web that people are going to share photos … Um, people are also using it to share messages with people and one of the big differentiators is just that people have really good control over who they're sharing their information with. So, um, for example, you get these cases where there are soldiers who are overseas in Iraq who can post specific information that they want to share with their families, right, and people can do this because they have really good privacy controls on the site. (ZF2009c)[2] |

In this statement, Zuckerberg touches upon a number of codes, including economic competition; Facebook's business and competitive advantages ("biggest place on the web that people are going to share photos"); Facebook as a tool (for sharing photos, messages); "sharing"; privacy via *control*; keeping in touch with family; "family members" as a type of user; and empowerment of the individual through Facebook (soldiers can communicate with families "*because* they have really good privacy controls").

Analysis

After coding the archive, we used the method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to guide our analysis. CDA "focuses on how language as a cultural tool mediates relationships of power and privilege in social interactions, institutions, and bodies of knowledge" (Rogers et al., 2005: 367). It is concerned with the relationship between language and power; consequently, CDA is politically involved and emancipatory in its aims (Titscher et al., 2000). The political project of the present analysis is to shed light on

particular constructions of social or technological actions or actors within the discourse of Mark Zuckerberg so as to make them available for further scrutiny. In this sense, we recognize that Zuckerberg's discourse, as with all discourse, contains implicit answers to "spoken or unspoken questions" that work to naturalize or legitimate certain social or technological practices (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 105). Moreover, CDA is particularly appropriate for thinking about Facebook's power and influence as a site boasting more than 1 billion active daily members and possessing the ability to shape (through algorithmic filtering and targeting) what information, news, or commercial content users see.

Analysis of the archive

What is Facebook?

Descriptions of Facebook—namely, what it *is* and what it *does*—have been central to Zuckerberg's language since the site's inception, but they have evolved as the site has expanded in scope and mission. For Zuckerberg, Facebook is and has been a place (ZF2010j), a tool (ZF2010g), a platform (ZF2010k), a product (ZF2009g), a business (ZF2010g), a community (ZF2011c), a utility (ZF2007a), a service (ZF2010c), and an infrastructure (ZF2008a). Notably, descriptions of Facebook as a type of utility appear throughout the archive, from the earliest discussions of Facebook as "an online directory for colleges" (ZF2005a) where "everyone could see some basic information about you" (ZF2010b) to later accounts of Facebook as a "core social infrastructure" for the Web (ZF2009g).

Zuckerberg's earliest accounts of Facebook revolve around the possibility of finding online the kind of basic information about his Harvard classmates that had, until 2004, been mostly available in printed directories, or "face books." In Zuckerberg's first available interview, he noted,

> Everyone's been talking a lot about a universal face book within Harvard. I think it's kind of silly that it would take the University a couple of years to get around to it. I can do it better than they can, and I can do it in a week. (ZF2004a)

The mission for this early Facebook "wasn't to make a huge community site, it was to make something where you could type in someone's name and find out a bunch of information about them" (ZF2005c).

However, Zuckerberg did recognize the site's social potential almost immediately, realizing that "people would use it for the social aspect" (ZF2004b). Despite this "social" potential, Zuckerberg initially resisted the "social network" label:

> Yeah, so I mean, I don't really call it a social network … I refer to it as an online directory, right? I think that they're kind of different things. I mean, a social network is a community application, and this definitely is a social application. The use of this is definitely aided by the use of friends and people around you using it. But I really just think that it's a utility, you know, and something that people use in their daily lives to look people up and find information about people. (ZF2005b)

Eventually, Zuckerberg embraced the social network label coupled with a broader social mission for the company:

> Facebook has evolved from a simple dorm-room project to a global social network connecting millions of people. We will keep building … [and] we will keep focused on achieving our mission of giving people the power to share and making the world more open and connected. (ZF2010a)

This identification with the "social"—and, for Facebook, related concepts of connection, openness, and sharing—marks a shift in Zuckerberg's language. Although many of these concepts were present in his earliest statements, here they congeal into a more explicit vision—one that has been frequently reiterated (ZF2009f, ZF2010f, ZF2012b, ZF2012c, ZF2013a, and ZF2014b) and codified in the site's governing documents (Facebook, n.d.).

More recently, accounts of Facebook as a kind of utility have resurfaced, albeit in a different form. No longer a simple directory of information or even just a social network, Zuckerberg views Facebook as a "core social infrastructure" (ZF2009g) for the Web and—increasingly—the world:

> There are a lot of big issues in the world that need to be resolved and as a company what we are trying to do is build an infrastructure on top of which to solve some of these problems. (ZF2008a)

> And we weren't yet at the point where the majority of their users were Facebook users, so they couldn't really rely on us as a piece of critical infrastructure for registration … Now really everyone can start to rely on us as infrastructure. That's a pretty big shift. (ZF2012f)

> It's, like, this aesthetic sense of the world that I have, is that you can, communities of people can channel their energy to do great things, and having connections between people is the infrastructure for the world to do that. (ZF2013b)

The shift from directory to social network to infrastructure is further evident in comparisons to other sites and services encouraged by Zuckerberg's interviewers. Early comparisons were almost exclusively made to Friendster and MySpace—though Zuckerberg frequently resisted or balked at these comparisons (e.g. "Fuck MySpace" [ZF2010i]). By 2012, however, comparisons to social networks like Friendster and MySpace had vanished, replaced by comparisons to Google (ZF2012e) and, to a lesser extent, Twitter (ZF2010d) and Apple (ZF2010e).

The comparisons to Google are particularly curious, since they were not present early on, when Facebook's services arguably most closely resembled a basic search directory. Instead, they only appear as Facebook began to promote and solidify its status as a "social infrastructure" for the Web, in much the same way that Google has become the Web's prevailing search infrastructure. But just as ceding control of access to information on the Web to a for-profit company like Google raises important questions of fairness, equity, and public utility (Vaidhyanathan, 2011), Facebook's position as a "social utility" promising a more open and connected world is at odds with its commercial

commitments (Fuchs, 2013). These commercial commitments are obscured by Zuckerberg's continued insistence on the idea of Facebook as a utility in service of a broad social mission.[3]

The Facebook user

As Facebook evolved from a small, interactive college directory to a global social network, it has claimed three discernible phases in Zuckerberg's language: (1) a useful directory for quickly finding information about people, (2) a social network connecting and enabling the sharing of information between people, and (3) a critical social infrastructure for the Web and, increasingly, the world. Alongside these shifts in Facebook's self-conception, the imagined Facebook user in Mark Zuckerberg's discourse has also shifted. Zuckerberg's discursive construction of the user offers insight into who Facebook is—and implicitly is not—for and how it fits into users' lives.

College students and the empowered user. Below, Zuckerberg discusses privacy concerns inherent in sites like Facebook:

> There are pretty intensive privacy options … You can limit who can see your information, if you only want current students to see your information, or people in your year, in your house, in your classes. You can limit a search so that only a friend or a friend of a friend can look you up. (ZF2004a)

Here, Zuckerberg introduces a number of potential users (then limited to Harvard students), including current students (further broken down into "people in your year, in your house, in your classes"), friends, and friends of friends. As the site began allowing users beyond college campuses to join, however, students received far less attention in Zuckerberg's public statements:

> When we built Facebook in 2004, our goal was to create a richer, faster way for people to share information about what was happening around them. We thought that giving people better tools to communicate would help them better understand the world, which would then give them even greater power to change the world. (ZF2009d)

This retelling of Facebook's founding obscures the foundational role of college students in the site's original conception and instead abstracts to "people" broadly, casting the Facebook/user relationship as not one of students connecting online but, rather, people that now have the power to share and change the world through their use of Facebook.

Friends and family/the global citizen. Although the role of college students in the site's genesis is increasingly downplayed, they reappear in Zuckerberg remarks on how the decision to expand the scope of who could sign up for Facebook was connected to changes in the lives of its initial student users:

> So in 2006, we had a lot of college students and high school students on the site and we made two pretty big changes … The first was we decided to make it so that anyone could sign up and

use it. And the reason for this was originally when I was getting started, I just wanted to make something that people could use to stay in touch with people at universities. But we're seeing that as people graduated from university, they still kept on using it. People in high school were using it in addition to people in college. People in colleges all over the US and even, you know, all over different places in the world were using it. (ZF2009g)

This statement reveals that, first, the decision to change the sign up process appears connected to changes in existing users' lives and the recognition that Facebook was simultaneously expanding into a global platform:

So we realized that this thing that we built was applicable beyond just universities. It was applicable … like everyone wants to stay connected with their friends and family. So the product really made sense for people of all ages and all countries and we decided just to make it so that everyone can sign up. (ZF2009g)

Instead of college students, the imagined users become "people of all ages and all countries"—though the category of "friends and family" remains.

In many of Zuckerberg's statements, in fact, descriptions of "friends and family" are co-located with accounts of the platform's expanding user base:

When we first started Facebook almost five years ago, most of the people using it were college students in the United States. Today, people of all ages—grandparents, parents and children— use Facebook in more than 35 different languages and 170 countries and territories. (ZF2009a)

In statements like the above, Zuckerberg positions Facebook as connecting both families and a global network. Notably, the attention given to friends and family as well as the site's international scope occurs in tandem with a change in Facebook's mission:

… our mission is to give people the power to share and to make the world more open and connected. So what we mean by this is that more open world is there's more information available, people can have access to more information, you can see what's going on with the people around you and more connected means that people can stay connected better with their friends and family, people immediately around them, but also people all across the world … (ZF2009g)

Here, we again see the ideal user as connecting with friends and family, but also in potential conversation with a geographically dispersed audience. By this time, users are no longer subjectively positioned as college students with social ties bounded by universities, but instead as cosmopolitan global citizens. The idea of "connecting the world" has since remained a mainstay in Facebook's mission statements and organizational rhetoric—an idea that conceals the ways in which the site simultaneously commodifies that connectivity (Van Dijck, 2013).

Despite a discursive abandonment of college students, traces of the original university-based user persist in ways that constrain the normative vision of the typical Facebook user broadly. The indebtedness to college-based user identities (that once limited registration on the site to individual, university-issued email addresses) is inextricably tied to

Facebook's emphasis on "real" names and identities, a feature considered "a very foundational element of what makes Facebook Facebook" (ZF2011a):

> So, one of the things that people don't think about that often today is early on we wanted to establish this culture of real identity on the service … And one of the ways that we, uh, kind of determined that someone was really who they said they were and their credentials were real were everyone had school email addresses … Because people typically only have one school account. So being able to bootstrap off of that was this really nice early thing that, that helped us establish this culture of real identity. (ZF2012d)

Moreover, these features of a "real identity" mirror those elements typical of the college directories that served as the site's original inspiration, including a picture and contact information. These elements allow users to say "… where you're from, where you went to school, where you work, whether you're in a relationship, maybe list some interests but not much else" (ZF2011b). Moreover, users on Facebook are—according to Zuckerberg—"their real selves the majority of the time" *because* they "put their real first and last name, they put a real picture of themselves" (ZF2009g). Despite attempts to move from a US-centric college-based user to a global conception of the user, then, Zuckerberg's descriptions of site profiles still reflect a normative idea typical of certain kinds of individuals in affluent liberal societies—an idea further reinforced by Zuckerberg's depiction of himself as the prototypical Facebook user (ZF2009g).

Community. Zuckerberg suggests that Facebook helps put users in contact with the communities around them, both physical and online:

> To celebrate and support all of these voices and their potential to improve the world, we are creating a space on Facebook where people can share their stories about how Facebook has helped them give back to their communities, effect change or connect with a distant relative. (ZF2009d)

> It's been amazing to see how all of you have used our tools to build a real community. You've shared the happy moments and the painful ones. You've started new families, and kept spread out families connected. You've created new services and built small businesses. You've helped each other in so many ways. (ZF2014a)

Zuckerberg's care to position online communities as on par with other communities may be a carefully chosen response to criticism that online sociality contributes to the erosion of physically proximate communities (e.g. Turkle, 2012). In deploying this language, Zuckerberg projects the image of users as strengthening their ties through the building of something "real."

Importantly, Facebook users are presented as both passive audiences for content and collective agents capable of action. For example, Zuckerberg argues that Facebook helps politicians engage with constituents while also helping users to connect with governments or become politically active:

Both U.S. President Barack Obama and French President Nicholas Sarkozy have used Facebook as a way to organize their supporters. From the protests against the Colombian FARC, a 40-year old terrorist organization, to fighting oppressive, fringe groups in India, people use Facebook as a platform to build connections and organize action. (ZF2009d)

Here, Zuckerberg suggests Facebook as a kind of "honest-broker" between users and social institutions—a place where users and politicians can interact and make the world a better place. This democratic ideal is also a major staple of Zuckerberg's "Letter to Shareholders," though in a slightly different way:

We [Facebook, Inc.] hope to change how people relate to their governments and social institutions … We believe building tools to help people share can bring a more honest and transparent dialogue around government that could lead to more direct empowerment of people, more accountability for officials and better solutions to some of the biggest problems of our time. (ZF2012a)

Here, the empowered user (or community of users) is emphasized while the role of top-down communication from politicians to citizens is downplayed. This suggests that while Facebook serves as a facilitator of social and political action, its real potential lies in empowering citizens in a grassroots, bottom-up fashion. This picture, however, runs counter to other discussions where Facebook's focuses on top-down communication from politicians, businesses, and other political or economic actors to potential consumers.

Businesses, celebrities. As businesses began to recognize Facebook's potential for engaging customers, they emerged in Zuckerberg's language as another kind of Facebook user—though they are not necessarily viewed as distinct or wholly different from individual users. Instead, he adjusts his vision of the user broadly in order to account for both commercial and non-commercial actors under a unified conception:

If you look at the space of the people who do brand advertising, which is basically advertising that's more for the long-term—not to sell something today, but instead to build a relationship—I think that that's going to be something that's not only accessible to the largest brands, but accessible to everyone. (ZF2009f)

Think about what people are doing on Facebook today. They're keeping up with their friends and family, but they're also building an image and identity for themselves, which in a sense is their brand. They're connecting with the audience that they want to connect to … If you carry that thinking over from people to things like stores and brands you realize that everyone's trying to do the same thing, which is communicate, build a reputation, build relationships with people, and just have more information out there. (ZF2009f)

Zuckerberg's discursive construction of concepts like communication, branding, and reputation management ultimately filters the individual's social activities through the lens of business and marketing.

Over time, Facebook's user-agenda has also shifted to incorporate celebrities, sparking a further recasting of individual users as "fans" or "followers":

> Last quarter, I talked about how we're working to connect people around important public moments and personalities on Facebook. This quarter, we've continued to build on our results and there are now more than 1 billion interactions every week between public figures and their fans on Facebook. (ZF2014d)

Notably, Facebook's role as a broadcaster for "public" content appears integral to the company's strategy for growth:

> Part of the reason why some of these public figures and political leaders and folks have such big followings is because they're constantly providing insight into their lives and unique types of content … We're mostly focused on driving success for partners, whether they're news organizations that are publishing content that people share or public figures and individuals who are engaging directly on Facebook. Our view is that the more success from distribution and engagement we can drive for them, the better the content and the quality that they're going to invest in building for Facebook. (ZF2014c)

In this passage, the potential for grassroots user-empowerment over Facebook is absent, supplanted by a top-down model of celebrities and public figures "building" content "for Facebook" as a particular kind of broadcasting outlet.

An ever evolving, ever shifting conception of users. Ultimately, what it means to be a Facebook user is closely tied to Facebook's growth as a platform and a business. Early on, Zuckerberg conceptualizes users as students with sets of friends at college. As Facebook expanded and users' contexts changed, university-based identities are abandoned and new ones—like family identities—get added in, as does a global component. As politicians, businesses, and celebrities are brought into the fold of Facebook users, users' lives are increasingly described in commercial terms. Along the way, Zuckerberg's language subtly shifts back and forth from describing users as empowered social and political actors to positioning them as little more than consumptive audiences. These shifts betray the tension between the site's social utility and its commercial commitments, a tension that (as suggested earlier) is often rendered invisible through appeals to a broader social mission.

Facebook listens

Facebook has been embroiled in controversies since its inception, including (but not limited to) platform changes, as in the wake of the introduction of the News Feed (Cashmore, 2006); changes to its terms of service, including expansions to retention of user data (cwalters, 2009); changes to profile accessibility, as when Facebook allowed profiles to be discoverable by search engines (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2007); Facebook's practice of indefinitely keeping copies of user data from deleted accounts (Aspan, 2008); and certain commodifications of user activity, as with "Beacon" (Cashmore, 2009). Mark Zuckerberg has publicly responded to many of these

controversies. Across these responses, we can identify trends in how Zuckerberg deploys language to deflect and assuage discontent, offering insights into the role of user feedback in Facebook's design process and the different ways that Facebook listens to its users.

Listening to users. In response to criticism after the introduction of News Feed in 2006, Mark Zuckerberg wrote,

> We've been getting a lot of feedback about Mini-Feed and News Feed. We think they are great products, but we know that many of you are not immediate fans, and have found them overwhelming and cluttered … We are listening to all your suggestions about how to improve the product; it's brand new and still evolving. (ZF2006a)

This statement is typical of the ways Zuckerberg talks about users and user feedback in the wake of controversy. It situates Facebook as attentive to users' voices, while positioning those voices within the context of an ever-changing Facebook. Consequently, users' voices and anger are naturalized as a feedback mechanism within the evolution of the platform. Zuckerberg assures the reader (presumably a user) that they have an important role to play in shaping Facebook's future. Thus, the user's outrage is not just heard, but also validated, actively channeled by Facebook toward a better product. Later, Zuckerberg writes, "We're going to continue to improve Facebook, and we want you to be part of that process. Test out the products and continue to provide us feedback" (ZF2006a). Here, Zuckerberg affirms Facebook's authority over its product, ultimately subjugating user voices to Facebook's iterative design processes.

This cycle of pushing out a new product, waiting for feedback (or blowback), and then changing the design appears at times to be Facebook's modus operandi. Zuckerberg has admitted, "Sometimes we move too fast—and after listening to recent concerns, we're responding" (ZF2010a). Facebook takes two steps forward and users cry out; Facebook, in its equanimity, responds by taking one step back. Elsewhere, Zuckerberg explicitly positions this back-and-forth as part of Facebook's strategy:

> Yeah. Well, I think that, you know, there's Beacon, there are lots of examples, where we've gotten feedback from users on large projects and little ones as well, that have changed our decisions. That's one of the great things about the internet is you can launch something and immediately get feedback and immediately react and build something good and launch it the next week. Right? (ZF2010h)

Zuckerberg couches feedback as a kind of dialogue with users. However, given problems of scale and inequities of power within Facebook, questions arise about the feasibility of this being an equal exchange. Instead, Zuckerberg's frequent appeals to affect or care in moments of controversy seem to suggest Facebook as a benevolent invigilator, mollifying critics and users by underscoring how much he personally values the feedback and criticism:

> … we will continue to have a dialogue with everyone who cares enough about Facebook to share their ideas. (ZF2010a)

> This may sound silly, but I want to thank all of you who have written in and created groups and protested. Even though I wish I hadn't made so many of you angry, I am glad we got to hear you. (ZF2006b)

By invoking a relationship of care, Zuckerberg seems to reaffirm power imbalances in the site while at the same time working to restore users' trust in Facebook.

User feedback. Zuckerberg has frequently stated that he relies on getting feedback from users themselves (ZF2014e). However, Zuckerberg has also noted that figuring out how and which voices to pay attention to has been a challenge as Facebook has scaled from hundreds to millions of users:

> I mean, this scale is so much different now than it was back then. So if we launch something now, we will get a lot of feedback but, it's a much smaller percent of the user base. And I think that a lot of that is because we're getting better at communicating with users, understanding the ways in which they want control over the information. (ZF2010h)

Consequently, Facebook has tried different mechanisms to solicit user feedback. In 2009, Facebook instituted procedures that allowed users to vote on policy changes after a comment period; changes would be binding if more than 30% of the Facebook user base took part in the vote. According to Zuckerberg, this mechanism was instituted to make Facebook "more transparent and democratic" (ZF2009e), positioning users as not just as part of a feedback loop but also as a kind of informal citizen:

> The Facebook community has grown a lot over the last few years and at two hundred million this population would be the fifth largest country in the world just ahead of Brazil. A community that large and engaged needs a more open process and a voice in governance. That's why a month ago, we announced a more transparent and democratic approach to governing the Facebook site … (ZF2009e)

We can also see how this democratic language implies that a more democratic Facebook will inherently foster better outcomes, an idea he makes explicit elsewhere:

> We're gonna open up governance of the site and put in ultimately a vote which means that people will have a say and be able to give any feedback they want on the rules and regulations, like, govern how we develop the product … So, we figured that, you know, in addition to helping people share information and connect with people, that we should also open up the process on how the site is governed in order to make it, um, just a better process for everyone. (ZF2009b)

Despite this being "just a better process for everyone," the voting option was discarded in 2012 (Darwell, 2012).

How and when Facebook listens. While the statement "Facebook listens to users" could refer to the consideration of user e-mails, messages, and other communications during the design process, Zuckerberg's language suggests something more expansive. While Facebook listens to what users *say*, it also listens to (or surveils) what users *do*:

So, we also listen in real time to the feedback that we're getting from people and that takes two primary um, formats. I mean one is we listen to all the kind of anecdotal feedback on the e-mails that we get or the posts that people make on Facebook, the blog posts that they write. Um, all the things that people tell us but we also look at the data of how people are actually using this site, right and how people are using the products that we launch because we know that, you know people, a lot of time when we'll change something, um, they won't like the change but we'll be able to tell very quickly how they're using the products and whether they're being able to use them to share more … (ZF2010e)

This statement demonstrates that when Facebook listens, it often does so through the collection and analysis of user behavior data. But, at the same time, this language also couches Facebook as a benevolent invigilator, surveilling users in order to understand what they *really* want versus what they *say* they want:

Well, you know, I mean, we've been—we listen to our users, um, we listen to a few things, you know, we listen to what they write: the e-mails that they send us, the blogposts they write; we also listen to the stats, right, and—and the data of—about what people are doing and we've found that the same number of people are promoting Facebook to their friends and encouraging them to sign up now as were before all of this, and the same number of people are sharing the same number of things as they were before. And—and some people have talked about deactivating but those numbers haven't changed either … So, yeah, I think some people are going to be critical and are going to have feedback and we want to listen to all of that feedback, but overall it doesn't seem like anything like a—like a big movement or anything like that. (ZF2010c)

Here, change in Facebook's practice and design appears tied to Facebook's evaluation of whether outrage is part of "a big movement." Given that many controversies over user privacy have been tied to marginalized groups (boyd, 2011), this raises questions about majoritarian bias and how Facebook balances concerns raised by users when it is not tied to large-scale user behavior changes.

Discussion

The foregoing analysis demonstrates the value of taking a more qualitative and holistic approach to Mark Zuckerberg's discourse to understand questions about the dominance of Facebook—the world's largest SNS—in much of contemporary life. Zuckerberg's discourse can be understood in relationship to many different aspects of Facebook: to its evolving development as a social infrastructure; to its specific affordances, design, and use; or to its ongoing controversies over topics such as privacy and surveillance. However, we have chosen to foreground the evolution of Facebook's self-definitions, the discursive construction of user identity, and the way Zuckerberg couches relationship between Facebook and its users not to just understand how Zuckerberg discursively constructs an evolving technical object, but to also better understand how discourse is deployed to mediate the relationship between a technology purveyor and its users in an evolving society.

Through self-definitions, Zuckerberg posits a way for the public to understand what Facebook is. Importantly, our analysis of self-definitions and the construction of user

identity resist (or even at times contradict) popular discussion of Facebook that tends to focus on its dominant status as a technology company or major player in Silicon Valley and more recently, the world. The reiteration and reification of this idea of Facebook has, over time, obscured the analog and utilitarian roots of Facebook as little more than a directory for aggregating and making findable information about individual people. Against the obscuring of Facebook's origins, careful discursive analysis shows how these original ideas and concepts continue to shape and constrain Facebook's activities today. The infrastructural and directory-based early vision of Facebook continues to manifest itself through the site's commercial activities and site policies, as with the commitment to a real-name policy that allows the site to make "real" individuals findable so as to drive user engagement and drive up advertising impressions (see, for example, Zip, 2015).

Furthermore, Zuckerberg's discursive construction of user identity offers a mold within which users can be cast. In narrating the relationship between Facebook and users, our analysis shows how Zuckerberg creates a kind of cosmology that places the users, commercial actors, and Facebook shoulder to shoulder—a view that flattens and obfuscates the incomprehensibly large differences in power between these different players. In this way, our work extends and adds another layer of nuance to previous work in this area—for example, it shows how Facebook not only gives users, as Freishtat and Sandlin (2010) argue, the appearance of control by simplifying and diversifying tools for managing content, but also by rhetorically positioning users on the same plane as would-be content exploiters. By taking a more comprehensive approach to Zuckerberg's discourse, we are able to make interconnections *between* topics visible: we can see and better understand how the construction of user identity is tied to Facebook's changing mission, the introduction and increasing importance of commercial actors on the site, and how these changes might be reflected in iterative design processes. Ultimately, our analysis reveals how, in many ways, Zuckerberg's discursive practices not only situates Facebook in society, but also situates society for Facebook.

Conclusion

The critical approach taken in this article is not the only one available to scholars. Zuckerberg's discourse demands analysis from a variety of critical lenses and frameworks. Future research might utilize a political–economic lens, for example, to provide a focused interrogation of how Zuckerberg's discourse on openness and privacy has been impacted by the presence of advertising on the platform. Communication scholars might consider analyzing how Zuckerberg performs a kind of prophetic ethos in order to persuade the public about Facebook's vision for the future of sociality. Postcolonial analysis of *The Zuckerberg Files* may show how Facebook's stated modus operandi in its desire to connect the world through programs such as Free Basics enacts new colonialism. Queer and feminist lenses can reveal how Zuckerberg's language reinforces and normalizes only specific kinds of user identity as "authentic." The work of this article is meant as a broad starting point for deeper investigation into the evolution of Zuckerberg's discursive construction of Facebook and its users, not an ending.

In addition, we take seriously the notion that CDA should be evaluated, in part, by the usability of its findings—as a political project, its results should be of practical relevance

(Titscher et al., 2000: 164). Our goal is to further a dialogue and scholarly inquiry in the area of discourse about technology generally. To this end, we have published our codebook online and we present the above as inviting further investigation and reflection.[4] While we have focused on the evolution of Zuckerberg's discourse surrounding Facebook's self-definitions, the construction of user identity, and the relationship between Facebook and its users, there is much more that can be done with *The Zuckerberg Files*. Indeed, Zuckerberg's discussions in the course of 10 years are too wide-ranging to be adequately captured in one article-length piece. For example, further work could explore how Zuckerberg's language changes in tandem with changes in Facebook's evolving privacy and content policies, its approach to advertising and growth since becoming a public company, and the broader promotion of Facebook as a platform for political, advocacy, and emergency communication.

Finally, we echo Beer and Burrows' (2007) call for greater analysis of the discursive construction of social media phenomena. We believe that creating digital archives of the public statements of social media platforms' founders, organizational representatives, and purveyors, and subsequently approaching them through the lens of CDA is an important way of fostering attention to this subject. By engaging in discourse analysis, we can gain a greater understanding of how these technologies are naturalized within society. While we have chosen to focus on Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook, other social media and computing platforms have also taken on prominence in the current social, political, economic, and cultural landscape. There is much gain by paying careful attention to how these technologies are discursively constructed, and we encourage future work interrogating the discourse of other contemporary technology leaders.

Acknowledgements

Funding

Notes

1. The creators of *The Zuckerberg Files* have estimated it represents at least 90% of all available content (Stingl, 2014).
2. Citations for quotations pulled from *The Zuckerberg Files* archive have been simplified to "ZFYYYY" for ease of reading. A full list of source documents cited is available at http://zuckerbergfiles.org/research
3. The authors would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for helpful feedback on this point.
4. The codebook is available at http://zuckerbergfiles.org/research

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