

Technological and Media Platforms: Redefinition of Meanings as Symbolic Power over the Discourse

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Abstract

Redefining the meanings of such social terms as “likes” and “friends” on Facebook is a popular practice. In terms of consistency, the (auto)-redefinition of the term “platform” is itself particularly important from a media management perspective. The article proposes to consider the redefinition of meanings as a form of wielding non-transparent power over discourse. From this perspective, redefining a meaning is a form of holding symbolic power, i.e. imposing meaning and thus concealing the system of powers existing at its base.

The article is theoretical in its nature and complements the framework that explains how, by redefining and imposing new meanings, media and technology platform managing companies can use a new interpretation of the relationship between the organization and the user and other entities. The aim of the article is to stimulate research on the redefinition of meanings as a form of media management by providing a new theoretical perspective.

Hermeneutics, that provides a framework for looking at the redefinition of meanings, was taken as the theoretical perspective.

Keywords: platforms, symbolic power.

Introduction

In the article, hermeneutics was applied as a research perspective of redefinition of meanings. It provides a convenient framework for looking at the interpretation process and is suitable for studying changes in meanings, and can lead to complementary explanations as to why some firms have a greater potential to redefine meanings.

Although the traditionally interpretational character of hermeneutics concerns written texts, the works of Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg extend it to activities in general¹. This remark needs to be complemented by the philosophical suggestion of Hans Georg that one may only reach the truth of a situation through understanding, as in a case of a translation, and not by an “objective measurement” characteristic for the modern science².

Considering the nature of the analysis, a particularly significant concept in hermeneutics is that parts of an action or situation can be understood only when placed in context, and vice versa, context can be understood only when these parts are understood.

Hermeneutic reflection requires critical creativity and confrontation of different perspectives as well as putting oneself in the analyzed situation, drawing on intuition and one’s own knowledge. It is also important to seek different interpretations in a continuous and active manner, to introduce new information channels and to adopt different perspectives.

The hermeneutic approach opens up to the constant reinterpretation of the surrounding world. Instead of keeping one constant perspective, the idea is to introduce a few perspectives. Rather than deciding on a permanent course, continual adjustments are in the centre of attention. In a word, it suggests the potential of redefining subsequent terms characterizing close social relationships and using these redefinitions in the management process.

¹ Alvesson, M., & Sköldberg, K. (2008) Interpretation and reflection: Philosophy of science and qualitative method.

² Habermas, J. (1990) A review of Gadamer’s Truth and Method. *The hermeneutic tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, 213-244.

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The above framework of hermeneutics matches the nature of redefining meanings, because hermeneutics allows directing further research in this matter, especially when it refers to the role of individual actors in the process of interpretation and the market consequences of redefining meanings.

The hermeneutic approach enables a better understanding of how innovative it is to use redefinition of meanings in the management process. The more innovative this non-transparent management factor is, going beyond the traditional connections between a media organization and users, the more innovative is the interpretation of the relationship between a company and the users of its services.

Redefining the meanings

Commonly known are the endeavours to redefine meanings in the environment of the new media and new technologies: the famous “likes” and “friends” of “friends” as well as claimed formation of societies joined the examples of cases when words are stripped of their original meanings and acquire new ones.

Assuming that words provide structure to public discourse, redefining the meaning as the essence of the process of using or even overusing a word and expanding the contexts where the words appear or creating exceptional collocations³.

In the process of redefinition, the meaning changes towards that preferred by the sender⁴. When the expected and imposed meanings become meanings decoded by the recipients, an effective redefinition takes place.

“Platform” as a semantic camouflage

The redefinition of meanings has fundamental market importance in the case of media and technology corporations that manage platforms. When they define themselves as “technological” and not as “media”, it signifies an escape from responsibility for the content that is present on their platforms.

The (auto)-reduction of platforms to a technological and programming entity is consistent with the message sent to users. For example, when Facebook makes efforts to convince others that it does not operate in the business of selecting what the world should read and watch, but in the “business of connecting people and ideas” (this is a classic example of “society rhetoric”), it escapes the responsibility for selecting and recommending media content, and the role of Facebook’s algorithms is only to provide users with what they expect, based on data analysis – and this is one of the objectives of this redefinition.

The management of discourses on the essence of the platform concerns, first of all, establishing the criteria according to which new “platform” technologies will be assessed and is aimed at building a protective shield in the public awareness. Some of the issues were included by Tarleton Gillespie in his essay “The Politics of ‘Platforms’”⁵ noting that there were four semantic territories for shaping the discourse around the “platform”: technical (as a computing platform, infrastructure supporting the design and development of operating systems, etc.), architectural (with an emphasis on physical shape – for example, an elevated surface on which people can stand), figurative (as a basis for action, metaphysical reference for opportunity and insight) and political (as a place to speak, a political position, a place open to all)⁶.

There is no possibility to point to a discourse that is more important or less important – they affect knowing the essence of a “platform” in a similar way, but knowing is never final, because it is sensitive to the “ethical catastrophes” of platform managers and to the evolution of managing the attention of platform users, to changing trends or, finally, dominant beliefs about their role. Such factors as, for example, the political environment (and its representatives), which is subject to the same discursive treatment as other users, are purposefully not mentioned.

In the environment of digital media and technology, every wave of new solutions, research and investment – from e-commerce, through Internet services, online advertising, to mobile and digital devices – brings those that are re-labelled using the term “platform” pushing its semantic boundary. It is a never-ending management process. This is what happened with user-generated content, blogs, and vlogs, and this is what is happening today – Gillespie published his essay in 2010 – when destructive innovations related to big data, cloud management and the expansion of artificial intelligence appeared.

³ Warchala J. (2019) *Formy perswazji*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice, p. 269.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Gillespie, T. (2010), ‘The politics of ‘platforms’’, *New media & society* 12(3), 347-364.

⁶ Ibidem.



The level of utility of this practice is demonstrated in how handy it becomes in emphasizing the opposition (and superiority) of new media organizations to traditional mass media. The “platform” not only promises the disappearance of gatekeepers and giving voice to those who were not heard before (as passive recipients/consumers not allowed to speak by gatekeepers), but also elevating – which is an outstanding rhetorical procedure – all its users equally.

The greatest benefit of using the term “platform” is the reconciliation of various discourses. The use of the same terminology for all interested parties makes it possible to address amateurs and professional users, advertisers and marketers and other institutional partners; it enables the reconciliation of what seems impossible: supplying advertisers with users’ attention on the platform while empowering the latter ones. As Gillespie precisely pointed out the above mentioned practices, under the label of a “platform” one can offer anything⁷. Users receive the promise of egalitarianism, advertisers get the environment to create a brand and launch a product on a market as well as access to users (target groups), while media producers get access to audiences and consumers. Gillespie describes this status as a “figurative platform of opportunity” (empowerment, sales, exchange) that takes into account various activities such as brand creation, popularity, affirmation, but also profit and wealth. In the platform, everyone can thus see (and expect) what is expected and what is suggested to him/her, while losing sight of what is important, and the social proof of rightness in the form of the presence of billions of individual and institutional entities does not facilitate the formulation of varying opinions.

“Platform” has become a word – a contrivance containing a powerful persuasive charge that makes it easier to assume a position at any time, on any topic, towards various groups of interested parties. This is a useful trick, because in legislative works it supports the idea of free competition, and above all, broadly understood neutrality, sometimes demonstrated in the corporate mission records, as in the case of Google. It also makes it easier for platform managers to implement efforts to uphold the competition rules in their role for upholding civil rights⁸. When the corporation managing the “platform” becomes identified with it, in social perception it begins to act as a defender of freedom. The skilfully combined figurative, political and technical aspects make it easier to downplay and use limited liability, the platform then acts as a purely neutral “carrier” environment of social “networks”, or possibly an indifferent “medium” providing services to the entire society.

Platforms but not media - redefinition objectives

The fact that Facebook is not a media company, but a neutral (technological) platform is to be proved primarily by the fact that it is not a producer of media content⁹. An equally important argument is the nature of the staff of Facebook and other organizations; Google, for example, is not supposed to be a media company, because it is managed by three scientists. The third argument in favour of the technological character is the lack of human intervention, because it is the algorithms that filter, classify and categorize the content, reflecting in their operation the expectations of the recipients, so it is a process without direct human intervention. This emphasized lack of an active human role in content-related processes is the basic logic behind the perception of media platforms as technology companies. The lack of direct human editorial interventions is to facilitate the further perception of neutrality in the content selection process and clearly differ from editorial practices in the traditional media.

Representatives of the so-called digital platforms argue that they differ from traditional media in the nature of their interaction with their audience, since they have much greater autonomy – the audience members determine which content they will consume, and platforms are merely neutral moderators. Such auto-defining is an expression of the evolution of the organization and takes place on many planes.

In this context, the term “platform” assumes various appearances; it is a labile term, useful in opinion-forming processes. Sometimes it poses as a technical platform, next as a platform of opportunities, perfectly meeting the needs of digital media organizations. It is ambiguous, it allows for shaping the information policy of an organization, but also claiming limited liability for the content posted by users.

In fact, by collecting and analyzing their data, for example, platforms have at their disposal technological solutions for identifying the needs of recipients that are more effective than traditional media. In this sense, more significant application of algorithms (but also greater dependence on them) is to ensure better satisfaction of the needs of users and institutional clients.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Meinrath, S. and Pickard, V. (2006), ‘The new network neutrality: Criteria for Internet freedom’ TPRC.

⁹ Baral S. (2016), ‘Is Facebook A Tech Or Media Company? CEO Mark Zuckerberg Weighs In’, [Online], [Retrieved May 22,2020], <http://www.ibtimes.com/facebook-tech-or-media-company-ceo-mark-zuckerberg-weighs-2409428>

In addition, referring to the technological orientation of personnel or management as an argument in favour of non-mediality puts media organizations out of the mainstream of technological advances in the media. The media and the development of technology are often juxtaposed as separate, based on different professional skills. Traditional media, such as workplace or radio, are to perish in history in the process of evolution, along with their propaganda connotations. In opposition to them and on their ruins, technological organizations using the new terminology are to be free from the media burden of social influence, particularly in its pejorative, manipulative contexts.

Such interpretations are accepted, but to a limited extent. For example, the European Commission uses the terms “media platforms” and “media intermediaries” interchangeably to refer to search engines, social networking sites, news sites and video streaming services, information aggregators, payment systems and applications.¹⁰ There is no definition of media platforms in the academic discourse, but they appear in the concept of Internet gatekeepers controlling information and showing the methods of executing the control¹¹. So far, the efforts to clarify the terminology were related primarily to the determination of the scope of responsibilities – this was achieved, among other things, by the separation of the gatekeepers who control the flow of information and the gatekeepers who, as a result of this control, influence participation and reflection in the culture of democracy¹², which enables the identification of the group of dominant corporations sometimes referred to as GAFA (Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple) from Internet providers.

Facebook, Twitter and many other platforms have been and continue to be referred to as new media/social media. However, the problem of their auto-definition is more and more important due to their growing importance as a source of information in cyberspace¹³. The terminology used to describe Google and Facebook is therefore not only semantic, thus having important social implications. There are also other reasons for the “escape from the mediality”. For example, legal protection that neither Google, Facebook, nor other “tech companies” would have had if they had been subject to the US Communications Decency Act and the European e-commerce directive that would have made them liable for spam, just like traditional media publishers.

Arguing that Facebook is obviously a media company, and not a “technological” company, Ian Bogost avoids taking any side of the dispute by pondering, first of all, over what makes the company defined as “technological”¹⁴. The term “technology” in the high-tech sector is a synthesis for the term of “computer technology”. Companies in this sector are involved in developing software, manufacturing hardware, peripherals, providing data processing services, digital advertising, etc., Therefore non-computer companies, for the obvious reason, do not belong to this sector¹⁵. Verification of this thesis should be sought on NASDAQ, where Google, Facebook, Amazon and many others are listed. They are classified in that stock exchange in accordance with the Industry Classification Benchmark (ICB), a system developed on the London Stock Exchange. “Internet” belongs to “computer software and services” there and the allocation of a company to a sector and sub-sector depends on its largest source of income. Microsoft, for example, is in the “technology, software and computer services” industry because this is the source of the corporation’s main revenue. Meanwhile, almost all revenues of Alphabet (Google), Facebook and Twitter come from advertising, which is why they are media organizations. In the case of Alphabet, the problem is more difficult, because it dealt with electric cars, and now, for example, it deals with artificial intelligence and health care (Calico), but the vast majority of its revenues still come from the advertising market.

These comments are important since distribution is a defining feature of the media; it is an element of the media value chain, both in the case of traditional and so-called new media. Creating media content, however, has never been the defining element of an enterprise from the regulatory perspective of the media sector. Therefore, the argument that the creation/possession of media content clearly differentiates the “technological” companies associated with them

¹⁰ European Commission (2015), ‘Press Release - Have your say on geo-blocking and the role of platforms in the online economy’, [Online], [Retrieved April 23, 2020] http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-5704_en.htm

¹¹ Barzilai-Nahon, K. (2008), ‘Toward a theory of network gatekeeping: A framework for exploring information control’, *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 59(9), 1493-1512.

¹² Laidlaw, E. B. (2010), ‘A framework for identifying Internet information gatekeepers’, *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology* 24(3), 263-276.

¹³ Gesenhues A. (2017), ‘Pew Research Center says 45% of Americans get their news from Facebook. The number of people getting news from social media continues to increase’, [Online], [Retrieved April 8, 2020], <https://marketingland.com/pew-research-center-says-45-americans-get-news-facebook-228001>

¹⁴ Bogost I. (2016), ‘Facebook Is Not a Technology Company’, *The Atlantic*. [Online], [Retrieved April 2, 2020], <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/08/facebook-is-not-a-technology-company/494183/>

¹⁵ Ibidem.

from media sector companies reflects a “naive” or insufficient understanding of the media, or intentional attempts to redefine what a “media company” is, motivated by organizational strategies¹⁶.

In the digital media environment, especially confronted with the development of the Internet, the arguments in favour of the “mediality” of Facebook and others are provided by a discussion on communication policies in particular countries, where the policies have been subject to adaptation to changes related to digitization, and where the disputes related primarily to whether the previous regulations could be applied to the Internet, which combined many traditional functions, but also offered new ones. This discussion highlights the importance of what language and what terms are used in the formulation of regulatory policy and the meaning of discourse analysis, as they have an impact on the application of various normative acts.

Redefining “platforms” as wielding symbolic power over discourse

The problem of power is present in numerous studies undertaken from many perspectives offering insight into a fragment of reality. From this perspective, the redefinition of meaning should be considered as a form of exercising symbolic power. It is the power of imposing a meaning, concealing the systems of forces existing at its base and manifesting itself in communication based on rationality¹⁷.

Symbolic power becomes particularly strong when it does not manifest itself, when those who are subject to power are subject to forms and thought patterns (here, imposed by signs and symbols that re-identify “friendship” and “likes”) and participate in its construction without perceiving subordination, and they actually make the forms and thought patterns stronger¹⁸.

Therefore, symbolic power takes place where it is not noticed, it is accepted without reflection and the perceived world is obvious, understandable, natural, because the measures applied to it come from this world. Submission then becomes obvious and legitimate and inevitable, and the subordinates favour particular interests. This power is concentrated in the hands of a few members of society and their organizations, symbolic elite that has social, political, cultural and economic capital in their constant conversion.

In the case of platforms, it is consistent with the logic of co-modification, superior when considering the market goals of the platforms, including the new logic of accumulation based on the market benefits of big data analytics¹⁹.

In the analysed context of new technology and media platforms, the symbolic power is in essence exercising power over discourse interpreted within the discourse analysis initiated thirty years ago²⁰ with its large base of streams and impressive network of notions²¹. In this approach, the analysis initially presented the way in which political power was exercised through language. Later, this trend included advertising, and more broadly speaking, promotion and media discourse, and, further, more areas of exercising symbolic power.

The sources of this reflection, however, should be seen in the critical theory, in the Frankfurt school (discourse can be used by groups of power) and the deliberations of Michel Foucault, from whom the critical analysis of discourse took over the belief that it was a kind of social activity, therefore social activities could be explained through linguistic analysis. Contemporary analysis deals primarily with social inequalities in research into power asymmetry, use, manipulation and structural inequalities through the study of media language, and promotional culture²². Importantly, the research programme, which in essence is a critical discourse analysis, is flexible and evolving, which means that such terms as power are defined differently. Norman Fairclough places research on social practices, i.e. forms of activity articulated in order to continue various social fields, institutions and organizations at the centre of this analysis.²³

¹⁶ Napoli, P. M. and Caplan, R. (2016), ‘Why media companies insist they're not media companies, why they're wrong, and why it matters’, *First Monday*. [Online], [Retrieved May 3, 2020], <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/7051/6124>

¹⁷ Bourdieu, P. (2000), *Pascalian meditations*. Stanford University Press.

¹⁸ Dębska, H. (2014), *Od władzy normatywnej do władzy symbolicznej*, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń.

¹⁹ Zuboff, S. (2015), ‘Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization’, *Journal of Information Technology* 30(1), 75-89.

²⁰ Fairclough, N. (1989) *Discourse and power*. Language and power, Longman, London.

²¹ Jabłońska, B. (2012) ‘Władza i wiedza w krytycznych studiach nad dyskursem – szkic teoretyczny’, *Studia Socjologiczne* 204(1), 75-92.

²² Blommaert, J. and Bulcaen, C. (2000) ‘Critical discourse analysis’, *Annual review of Anthropology* 29(1), 447-466.

²³ Fairclough, N. (1989) op. cit., p 24.



It should be added that in the critical analysis of discourse, the socio-cultural school (Fairclough) or the analysis of discursive phenomena (van Dijk) concern the relationship of power and knowledge. In the post-structural tradition, power becomes a process related to knowledge and discourse, permeates social relations, manifests itself in the actions of actors, which means that there is no social reality without a power relationship²⁴. Moreover, it can only be defined in relation to discourse (i.e. language in use), that is in relation to what is not a “reflection of the world” but “violence inflicted on things”, therefore discourse is related to power and involves imposing a way of thinking and speaking about reality²⁵. Discourse is therefore used to influence people and their perception of the world, and the notion of “hegemony” is used in such an analysis.

As part of the analysis of the relationship between various social spheres and organizations, research is carried out between various orders of discourse, understood as the social structuring of semiotic diversity. Typically, one manner of setting an order one aspect of creating a meaning dominate in the process while others are either marginalized or treated as oppositional.

Summary

“Technological” rhetoric in combination with a pro-social or society-related image is to emphasize the pioneering, unique character of the organizations in question and concentrate on technological competences and take the attention away from social effects. The interpretation claiming that Google and Facebook are media companies would concentrate on their social impact and responsibility, which involves regulatory interventions in the name of protecting the public interest joined with political issues, diversity and competition. Such interventions concerned and still concern television stations, press publications or cable systems and may concern the so-called new media platforms. This would be in line with the logic that, for example, the differentiation of the access of different content creators to the audience should be the overriding social interest protected by the state. In this situation, managers of websites, applications, search engines and social media try to establish such identity that would exclude or limit similar interventions, and the rhetoric of “non-media” has so far effectively influenced the public discussion on the subject.

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²⁴ Jabłońska, B. (2012) op. cit, p.81.

²⁵ Foucault, M. (1977) *Archeologia wiedzy*, PIW, Warszawa.



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