

## I'm Doing It Wrong: Political Posts on Facebook

David J. Marshall

Facebook is something many of us use every day, and as we use it, its uses change. There are social and political pressures to behave in certain ways on Facebook, and acceptance of these powerful forces can limit what we do with Facebook and other social media. Marshall argues that our interests and activities define what Facebook is, not the other way around, and that any use of Facebook is a social and political act.

A person from a group I liked on Facebook (Planned Parenthood) posted the variation on a meme shown below in Figure 1.

I've never met the person who originally posted this image. Most who had also belonged to this Facebook group (meaning they had liked this group sometime in the past and had not un-liked this group since that decisive digital move) and who were moved to respond to this post in some way gave rave reviews and favorable comments. I liked it so much I shared it on my wall. About an hour later, one of my friends posted the image



Figure 1. An image I liked and shared on Facebook ("Vote").

pictured in Figure 2, another variation on a meme, and I saw it as I scrolled down my browser while eating lunch.

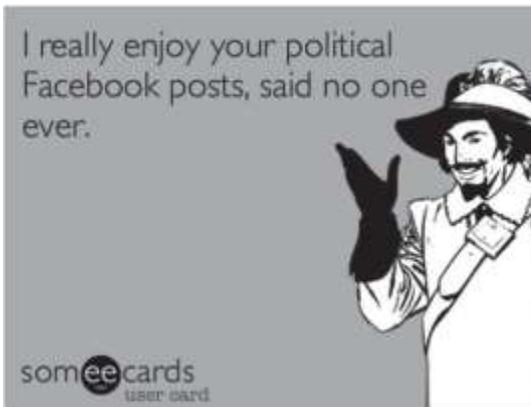


Figure 2. An image that criticizes political Facebook posts and post- ing (“I really enjoy”).

So, one of my friends shared this image with me. Well, actually, my friend shared it with all of his friends, and many of them are not my friends, so it was not directed specifically at me. (Or was it?) Figure 2 is funny because I believe it is accurate to an extent. It seems most people on Facebook share vacation photos, pictures of pets, what they are listening to on Spotify (or whatever), or some hilarious things their kids said. Of course the “no one ever” part of

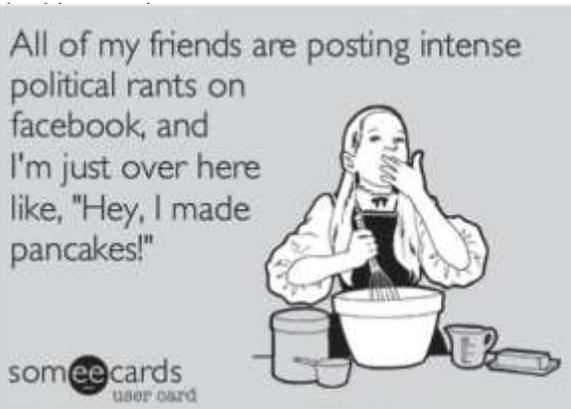
this modified meme ruins it for me, because I (sigh), David J. Marshall, have at many times enjoyed “political” posts on Facebook.

And while I’m in this confessional mood, I should also mention that I’ve posted what might be construed as “political” materials to my wall on Facebook. I’ll stop putting “political” in quotation marks after this sentence because it is probably annoying, but I have been doing so to make a point. The meaning of the word itself is a subject of contention and has been for quite some time. (For example, people tend to categorize things they don’t like as political.) And in my experiences on Facebook, I can also see conflict regarding what might be called the “appropriateness” of publishing/ sharing or commenting on political material. This conflict shows evidence of Facebook in the continual process of defining itself as an activity system, which is basically any group or individual socializing process, or what David Russell defines as “any ongoing, object-directed, historically-conditioned, dialectically-structured, tool-mediated human interaction: a family, a religious organization, an advocacy group, a political movement, a course of study, a school, a discipline, a research laboratory, a profession, and so on” (504). But what really makes activity systems interesting—to me at least—is that they are, again according to Russell, “mutually (re)constructed by participants using certain tools and not others (including discursive tools such as speech sounds and inscriptions)” (504). This description means that what I do within an activity system defines it, and what others who participate in that system do also defines it. Sounds like Facebook to me, but maybe I’m doing it wrong. Maybe my friend is right.

My friend’s variation on the meme in Figure 2 (not her own creation but shared by some other person who shared it from someone else, etc.) made me think. I wondered if my past and current Facebook behaviors were

appropriate. I mean, not everyone posts stuff on Facebook about Planned Parenthood, political funding, human rights, Occupy Chicago, or other material that's just plain critical of corporations. And I am aware enough to see that most people avoid saying anything even vaguely controversial on Facebook. But isn't this avoidance, this exclusive type of behavior, actually political in and of itself? This kind of participation in the activity system that is Facebook says to me, "You're doing it wrong. Behave more like me. Post pictures of your cat. If you don't have a cat, buy one. Or a dog. This is normal behavior in this system." If I am shamed into thinking about the appropriateness of my interests and purposes, isn't that socialization (the changing of behavior to meet norms), and therefore political? Aren't all activities that involve the reading and writing of many different genres, like Facebook, about enacting the power to comprehend, interpret, and then shape behavior? (And as I write the word "many," don't I mean "most" written and even visual genres? I can put any type of alphabetic writing on Facebook. I can put films, clips, or links to anything on the web. So is Facebook, by its uses, merely a generic black hole, the "eater of all digital genres"?) There are dynamics at work here that are fueled by considerations and inconsiderations of audience, purpose, and genre, demonstrating Facebook's social and cultural (and yes, political) power.

Perhaps, then, what we are  
constellation, or network, of act  
Facebook. My friend wants to use  
pictures of cute doggies and kid  
cake, and that's certainly a pop  
Facebook. On the other hand,  
Facebook to read about what is l  
world and to connect to other p  
think taking thoughtful  
action is what makes the  
world worth



living in, and as I'll argue later, this is quite a popular activity on Facebook, too. Is one of these ways of behaving more appropriate than the other in this activity system? Regardless of the answer, what ends up happening is that all of these activities become connected in some way, be it intentional or unintentional, meaningful or not so much. Still, those who fall in the former group of Facebook users might accuse me of "doing it wrong," as Figure 3 suggests.

Maybe my arguably “inappropriate” behavior on Facebook is just a misjudgment of audience on my part. But it is difficult to talk about all users of Facebook as an audience. There are one billion of them, according to Mark Zuckerberg. What do any one billion people have in common, except for the fact that they use the same web-based software to communicate some of the time (and do so on the same planet)? I mean, do you know anyone who uses only Facebook to communicate? I’m sure they are out there somewhere, but I don’t know them.

Supposedly, a Facebook user’s audience is the group of people authorized to get full access to their page, their friends list. Of course, this is complicated by the fact that Facebook policies and end-user agreements are changing all the time. When I post something, who is my audience? Is it really just my friends? I can also choose only some of my friends, a group of friends, or just family, as long as I designate who those people are. What if a friend reposts my post? What if I don’t know what my privacy settings are or how to work them? We’ve all seen what can happen when someone misrecognizes an audience—when TMI (too much information) and Facebook collide, and people lose jobs, marriages explode, and future political ambitions disintegrate forever. And when I respond to someone’s post, people outside of my friends list see that, right? And even if a post stays only on my wall and only my friends see it, I have a range of people from my life on Facebook—from high school friends I haven’t had a real conversation with in many years, to former professors, to parents of my friends. It seems, then, if Facebook is an activity system, or a network of activity systems, the capabilities of the tools involved enact a collision of audiences and trajectories and purposes. If this collision is not intentional, then I would have to say that Facebook is poorly designed. But I don’t say that.

So when users put something on Facebook, they are implicitly and/or explicitly thinking of these audience considerations (and likely many others) before, during, and after the act of typing, uploading a photo, sharing, etc. But the crowded make-up of the audience with which we are communicating makes any thoughtful navigation of said audience somewhat of a crapshoot. And more importantly, it smushes what might reasonably be called several different activities with several different audiences into one complicated online space. It might be reasonable to say that “taking my audience into consideration” when posting on Facebook is a fragile and tenuous process at best. And Facebook isn’t necessarily special in this regard. While using most social networking sites, knowing one’s audience can be mostly guesswork.

In addition to my audience confusion, maybe my “problem” with Facebook is that I don’t understand its purpose. Facebook started out as a

“social” site for college students, but has since grown to include people of all different ages, backgrounds, and social characteristics. As the audience has expanded, the number and types of purposes have also necessarily expanded. And if you believe much social theory (cf. Foucault, Barthes), there is little difference between a discussion of the “social” (as the study of behavior) and the discussion of the political, anyway. The site-as-party-documentation role of Facebook is just as political (in that it argues for particular ideological and cultural values) as someone posting an article about a petition or a letter-to-your-congressperson campaign, or even a “flame war” that has people posting insults back and forth. (Personally I value these exchanges, although I don’t participate in them. Where else can you see people using activity systems like the ones in Facebook to define, persuade, and express their opinions, being honest enough to involve emotion? But that’s just me.)

Perhaps it would be useful to have a body of research that shows how people generally use Facebook. There is relatively little research on general usage statistics because that kind of information is highly valuable advertising information that Facebook sells (and if that’s not technological and political black boxing, I don’t know what is). But there are a few studies that have looked at how people engage the political through social networking sites like Facebook. In one such study that focused on the 2008 election, it was found that political self-expression was deemed acceptable by many users, but efforts to persuade were less acceptable (Vitak et al. 112), which suggests that there is nuance involved in ranking the “appropriateness” of particular social networking activities like those that take place on Facebook. Some political activities like “expression” are okay, but when you try to “sell” that expression to someone, it’s not okay. (But please, sell me something from Target or Walmart.) Of course, we should wonder what the difference is between “expression” and “coercion.” If someone is expressing their political beliefs using a networked system of activities, like Facebook, with all of the audience complexities I discussed earlier, are they not trying to persuade us, at least in some subtle way? Again, it’s hard for me to see any expression on Facebook as completely “innocent” or devoid of intent or political significance, whether it is an expression related to a political party or simply about a product or store. It’s also worth mentioning that this study was done in 2008, when Facebook users numbered a mere four hundred million. I wonder how much these dynamics have changed in the last five years as users of Facebook (and many other social networking sites) have increased significantly.

So why does it seem like there is so much resistance to the political on Facebook? A quick search on Google using the words “political posts facebook” shows that many people are trying to avoid political material on Facebook. Articles with titles like “How to Block Annoying Political Posts on Facebook”

and “Noppl Lets You Hide Your Friends’ Political Posts on Facebook” seem to make up most of the search results. There is even an official community on Facebook called, “Nobody Cares About Your Political Posts. Really.” (Of course, the group only has 301 likes.) Maybe even the apolitical groups are too political for most people (and that’s not surprising because, by definition, encouraging people not to post something is political behavior). It seems odd that political engagement is supposedly valued in our culture, and there are often complaints when people don’t participate politically (as in news articles that tell us about low voter turnout, polls showing low interest in campaigns, etc.), but when people actually do engage the political (beyond sending a donation) on Facebook, for example, there is “norming” pressure to cease these activities.

On the other hand, Planned Parenthood has 343,538 likes. So there are people like me out there. That’s comforting. But maybe they are all doing it wrong, like me. And maybe these Planned Parenthood people don’t like reading other kinds of political posts. Or maybe some of them don’t think Planned Parenthood is political.

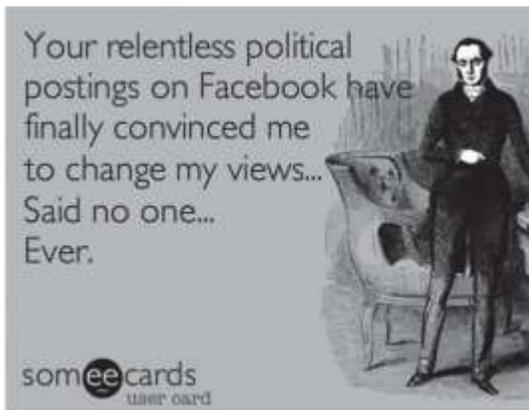


Figure 4. Another image that criticizes political Facebook posts and posting (“Your relentless political postings”).

Most of the memes I come across about political behavior, like Figure 4, suggest that political posts on Facebook have no effect, which is what really gets me going. Earlier this year, the Susan

G. Komen Foundation changed its policy decision to de-fund Planned Parenthood largely due to communications and petition activity started on Facebook and Twitter. So I’d say there was a big difference made there. Also, the American Legislative Exchange

Council (ALEC), a formerly influential and well-funded political “non-profit,” has been essentially de-funded due to campaigns started on Facebook and Twitter. These campaigns convinced huge corporations like McDonalds, Amazon, Microsoft, and many others to stop funding ALEC because of their political activities (like voter disenfranchisement according to race and economic status and the design and implementation of “stand your ground” laws). So I have to disagree with those who say political activity on Facebook changes no one’s mind. It may not seem like much, but it is not “no one.” These two examples also illustrate how social networking sites have changed how we “do” politics, in that people are using Facebook for what Lanlois et al. call “issue networks,” in which people/users find groups devoted to a single

issue or a small group of issues rather than seeking out the larger political parties or posting on a presidential candidate's official "person" page (421). This dynamic becomes much more pronounced and significant in a network of activity systems like Facebook.

Beyond the effectiveness of the political movements or networks on Facebook, some evidence suggests that individual people do change their minds due to what they see on Facebook. According to the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, 36% of a particular population sample said that they use social networking sites (SNS) to keep up with political news. And "25% of SNS users say the sites are 'very important' or 'somewhat important' to them for debating or discussing political issues with others." That's not a majority, but, again, one-fourth is hardly "no one." And according to Vitak et al., Facebook may play an important role as another training ground for young people (or anyone, for that matter) to try out "civic skills" and learn more about their own views as well as the views of others (108).

Maybe Facebook was not meant to be political. It was meant to sell stuff, right? And advertisers don't like to muddy up their squeaky clean brand images with the reality of the political, the cultural, and the social. But maybe one of the dynamics at work on Facebook is one that advertisers and political avoiders can't bottle up and sell, or prevent. When people use Facebook and other social network sites, they don't just take what Facebook has to give, (although they do that, too). They also give of themselves. They contribute. They participate. They appropriate it for themselves. And when people use or interact with something (a genre, a book, a game, an activity, a company, a conversation), they can change it. Sometimes these changes are negligible, but sometimes they can change the purpose of something. Even Facebook. Facebook can define our behaviors. It is a powerful network of activities. But that activity will always be defining and redefining itself through our behaviors in that activity system. We can define Facebook simply by using it in ways important to us as individuals, not just the way it was intended. So, I guess I'm not doing it wrong after all.

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