FACEBOOK AS A META-IDEOLOGICAL APPARATUS

REASSESSING THE ENCODING/DECODING MODEL IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Certificate of Authorship

I certify that the work presented in this dissertation has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged in the text.

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This work is dedicated to my dad, Hervé-Luc Palmer and to my "Podri", Marcos Palmer Alemany, who both would be very proud to see that, in two generations, the three years of elementary school done by my grand-father allowed me to be a doctor.

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Abstract

Social media, over the past fifteen years, has become a major gateway to news. The practice of an algorithmically-customised selection of news content has revived critical concerns within the research community regarding the risk of large scale ideology diffusion without appearing to do so. This research aims to tackle those critical concerns, investigating how the circulation of news on social media, via algorithmic customisation, may impact how the users decode news posts, using Facebook as a case study.

A transdisciplinary qualitative approach combining cultural studies and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has been chosen. A series of in-depth interviews with a 'guided tour' of Facebook's newsfeeds was conducted and screen-recorded with a sample of young journalism students. The interview data and the researcher's observations during the guided tour served to understand decoding practices via a thematic analysis while the content of the newsfeeds was used to observe what the algorithm selected for them, and how meaning was created through circulation. The news posts were coded with an automated semantic tagger, in order to reproduce an algorithmic thinking process, and then a multimodal analysis model was done to investigate any surface patterns of meaning making.

The analysis of the participants' newsfeed showed that the circulation moment may be compared to a decoding/encoding sequence. The newsfeed-generating algorithm decoded both the news contents posted on the platform and its users' preferences, and then re-encoded the news posts before re-circulating them to users. During the circulation, no new verbal message is created, but existing ones are aggregated together and contextualised in a certain way, to orientate users' decoding towards the algorithm's preferred meaning.

Despite being orientated to decode towards the algorithm's preferred meaning, users seemed to preserve their decoding autonomy. They appeared to adapt their decoding practices and to interpret the ideological connotations carried by a news posts before comprehending it and identifying its relevance. When appraising unmarkedness, instead of positioning themselves with respect to the algorithm's code, they evaluated the news post code with respect to their own set of values. Additionally, on Facebook users systematically

encoded a post-decoding response which was automatically transmitted to the algorithm and worked to inform further circulation. Therefore, the circulation of news posts on Facebook's newsfeed was redefined as an encoding/decoding circuit composed of three moments: production encoding/decoding, circulation decoding/encoding, and 'prosumption' decoding/encoding. The larger implications of this redefinition are the characterisation of Facebook as a meta-ideological apparatus, promoting a meta-ideological cultural order that encompasses the cultural order promoted by news producers.