**Revealing the politics in ‘soft’, everyday uses of social media: the challenge for Critical Discourse Studies**

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Everywhere, social media sites are alive with overt political and social commentary, as well as the usual more mundane, every day, ‘soft’ content. We argue all of this, from the seemingly banal to the most morally charged, is ideological and political. It is infused with ideas and values, with discourses about how we should run our societies, what we should prioritise, how we should communicate, and judgements about identities and actions. Michael Billig (1995) wrote about the way ‘nationalism’ can best be studied, not so much in political speeches and official national events, but buried in the everyday, like weather maps, sporting events and food packaging. In this special issue, we are also interested in what Billig coined ‘banal politics’, but in the digital realm. We demonstrate the importance and value of researching the political in everyday communication on social media. We ask how communication about everyday events, actions, issues and people articulate dominant (and sometimes alternative) ideological discourses about the nature of our society.

At the time of writing, there were a number of popular feeds on Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter). One feed expressed anger and made fun of Donald Trump’s anti-Chinese tweets. Another trending feed discussed gender inequalities in the workplace. Yet another feed saw users sharing stylized images of food, discussing travel destinations, and ‘experts’ promoting fitness programmes. What is clear from the point of view of two critical discourse analysts looking at this range of posts as data, is how all of these carry with them ideas and values about how we should live and what should be valued and prioritised, whilst defining the very nature of doing social, political and ‘softer’ debate. Let’s consider two of these feeds to illustrate our point.

The angry and sarcastic Weibo posts about Trump were clever in their creative humour and use of memes. Trump’s simplifications of ‘the Chinese virus’ and Chinese evil-doing were turned back on him as users demonstrated their mastery over playful language and the manipulation of imagery. However, on closer examination it becomes obvious these posts were just as populist, simplistic and polarising as Trump’s original tweets. Like Trump, they used symbolism, insults, conspiracy theories and a sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ to rally against America. There was no clear sense of the US/ China ‘trade war’ political context that was ongoing at the time and related to Trump seeking to delegitimize China. Nor was there a sense of Trump’s populist strategies, nor the reasons the US healthcare system is less than robust for much of its population. In fact, the posts themselves, with their anti-Americanism, their sense of ‘we’ and ‘us’, and their simplifications, were symptomatic of what has been described by some scholars as Right-Wing Populism (Wodak, 2015).

Our point here is that at one level these posts appear political – challenging the US president’s anti-China rhetoric. Yet at another level, they resemble typical ways that social media feeds can be used to rally against any person or issue without any deep critical engagement or reflection (Ott, 2017; Papacharissi, 2015; Bouvier, 2020). So here, there is fun to be had mocking Trump as a kind of retort to his own attack on China, but through a populist nationalist rhetoric. Though scholars have analysed Trump memes and revealed that while they make us laugh, they are also highly ideological (Merrin 2019; Way 2021). Through a close analysis, there is much to be said about how social media users go about criticising politicians ‘for a laugh’ and what broader notions about politics, people and society surface. We return to this later.

Let’s take a look at another popular Weibo feed at the time: fitness experts (see Bouvier and Chen in this issue). At one level, this is about women getting fit and caring for their bodies. This is something that is on the increase in China, accompanied by a growing interest in gyms and healthy diet products (Tong et al., 2020). But the ‘experts’ and those posting on the feeds speak in terms of ‘getting ahead’ and ‘self-betterment’. As such, fitness appears, much like its counterparts in the US and Europe, as part of a discourse of being successful, embedded clearly in broader lifestyle and consumption patterns. These fitness posts, as well as those about food and travel, are not about ‘politics’ in the formal sense. Yet they are ideological or ‘political’ in the sense that they present ideas and values about how people should act and behave, laying out what priorities we should have, and how we should evaluate others. They appear mundane, infused into the everyday. Yet like the Weibo posts about Trump, they carry trace discourses about how we organise our societies and the types of social relations this involves. They articulate discourses about how we understand and deal with social phenomena, whether this is in terms of international relations, home and work life, or diet and health.

On such feeds, we can ask not only what is represented, but also what is missing: what does not get talked about in relation to specific domains? ‘Recontextualisations’ is a useful concept used by Critical Discourse Analysts (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Any representation (in language, any other mode or combination of modes) is viewed not as a faithful representation of a situation, event or process, but rather one that excludes, foregrounds, adds and/or resequences parts of an original social practice. Simply put, this approach reveals strategies that abstract and ‘recontextualise’ social practices, as noted in criticisms of Trump described above where actual economic relations and dealing with a pandemic become substituted by personal attacks and simplified polarities. On the fitness feed, overall life success is open to all who are willing to strive hard, where individual circumstance, such as socio-economic position is irrelevant.

Another different Weibo feed deals not in concrete terms about actual issues in a society where huge sections of the population still live in poverty, often working seven days a week, but in terms of individual rights and ‘career opportunities’ in a generic sense. These are, of course, crucial. However, those posting never referred to real people, nor actual contexts. This feed could have been from any society where equality is very much related to individualism, getting-ahead, and more abstract senses of ‘success’. A ten-minute walk from the university campus where one of the authors lives brings a striking shift in social context. Here we find a place where life can be more of a constant struggle, to pay rent, to find work, to keep children out of cycles of marginalization. In what ways do these very discourses about equality, getting ahead, striving for success, straight out of the repertoire of neoliberalism, as some scholars have asked, fog our very possibility of understanding the causes of inequality, or what equality might mean (Johnson, 2011)? In these cases, there is a task for Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) to understand more about the discourses carried in these social media feeds.

Scholars argue that social media provides us with new access to the ways dominant ideologies are carried within populations (KhosraviNik, 2017). Previously, we have successfully studied the top-down dissemination of ideologies that has supported the interests of dominant groups in society. Here we have access to how such ideologies are taken on, negotiated, or challenged. In this special issue, we show this is not necessarily done by looking at how people communicate about formal political matters, nor taking for granted that this is a bottom-up process. We carefully look at how political ideologies lie in the assumptions about society and social relations subtly articulated in social media posts, whether these relate to a foreign country, gender inequalities, or fitness programmes.

In this introduction, we show how and why finding ‘banal politics’ in social media contributes to current social media scholarship. We also point to the value of looking at the popular by examining some of the scholarship that has made this very clear, but which has received less attention in recent decades. All of this is important for CDS scholarship since ideologies are not simply communicated, disseminated and naturalised by political speeches, overt social commentary, or news media. Rather, they are infused and embedded into all forms and materials of communication from a digital administration system, a pop music video, the interior design of a school room, or a cafe (Ledin & Machin, 2018). Such ideologies, therefore, become imprinted into the very materiality of our everyday lives. If we want to really understand politics and ideology, we need to look in these places.

**How does this fit into and contribute to social media scholarship?**

Much scholarship has been hugely optimistic about the democratic and social justice potential social media has. It is seen to grant those previously excluded from public dialogue a voice, being heard outside of their immediate communities, bringing new possibilities for sharing ideas, viewpoints and concerns (Castells, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). There are a number of highly celebrated cases noted in Western societies such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter.

Other scholars document a range of lower profile international cases relating to social justice (Florini, 2014; Jackson et al., 2020; Penney & Dadas, 2013; Yang, 2018), bringing the power to negotiate situations where mainstream media are controlled by political regimes (Ronzhyn, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2012; Tufekci, 2017; Yang, 2014). Those who share political concerns are able to connect and create what can be thought of as networks of dissent (e.g., Jackson et al., 2020), which can lead to physical mobilization (Tufekci, 2017). From the perspective of CDS, whereas we may have previously focused on the communication of mainstream media and elite discourses communicated in a ‘top-down’ direction (Van Dijk, 1998), now we may also track how discourses are created in a ‘bottom-up’ manner and ask how these challenge elite ideologies (KhosraviNik, 2017).

All the same, we need careful research to reveal how dominant ideologies may infuse the nature of such voices from below (ibid). Not all research points to the democratising role of social media. It can be harnessed and colonized by voices and interests that represent forms of extremism (Creemers, 2017; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; MacKinnon, 2011; Morozov, 2011). This can relate to radicalization, violent aims, racism and xenophobia (Gentleman, 2011; Huey, 2015). Bouvier (2020), however, suggests there is a danger that we take the notions of democratizing and illiberal social media feeds at face value. She suggests that more research is required to consider how both forms may be underpinned by shared ideological foundations and patterns of argumentation, as they take place on social media.

There has also been research that examines how social media play a role in democratizing mainstream political processes. Here, some suggest that it has made politicians more accessible and accountable, where citizens are able to enter into direct dialogue with them (Graham et al., 2016; Tromble, 2018), and social media now takes on a Fifth Estate role (Lilliker & Jackson, 2010). However, researchers note that for the most part politicians use social media to engage with other politicians and elite journalists rather than actual citizens, and the situation is highly hierarchical (Bruns & Highfield, 2013). Furthermore, most trending feeds are seldom ‘bottom up’ but created by elites, such as journalists, celebrities (Bruns et al., 2013; Enli & Simonsen, 2017) and other influencers who understand the processes of driving engagement and trending (Hermida et al., 2014; Page, 2012; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Siapera et al., 2015). Such research is, of course, of huge value, but from the point of view of understanding ideologies in society, it tells us little.

There are also scholars who point to the limitations of social media in regard to the way that communication tends to take place. Here, scholars question the extent that such platforms foster more complex or detailed discussions of issues that might form a useful part of democratic processes (Al-Tahmazi, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2012; Hall Jamieson & Capella, 2010; Pariser, 2011). One of the earliest concerns about the nature of social and political debate on social media was that it can take a highly insular form (KhosraviNik, 2017). Users tend not to look outwards to new topics or worldviews but are attracted to what is familiar, comfortable, and confirms their existing viewpoints. On the basis of previous social media activities, algorithms offer users feeds that tend to have similar configurations of ideas and interests (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017). It has been argued, therefore, that social media fosters ideological inflexibility (Ng, 2020), since users can become locked into feeds and networks where they experience familiar ideas, concerns, symbolism, viewpoints and narratives about the world (Baumgaertner et al., 2016; Jacobs & Spierings, 2018).

Research demonstrates how social media feeds are rarely comprised of clear and coherent discussions. Rather, they tend to contain simple, polarized narratives, buzzwords and symbolism (Papacharissi, 2015; Sampson et al., 2018; Way, 2015). Social and political issues, their causes, related events and histories may be unclear, but placed into a simple good-and-evil narrative, where a collective sense of outrage, fun or mobilization is foregrounded (Bouvier, 2019). The example of the Weibo posts about Trump we considered earlier fits well with such observations.

The collective sense of outrage, fun or shared mobilization that can take place on social media platforms can drive a sense of greater engagement and moral intensity, though this has been seen as a barrier to more nuanced commentary (Merrin, 2019; Papacharissi, 2015; Sampson et al., 2018). This is one reason social media can easily descend into insults and personal attacks (Ott, 2017; Shepherd et al., 2015). Incivility, sarcasm and cruel humour, which can include memes and gifs, can drive engagement in a way that detailed, nuanced commentary may not (Henefeld, 2016; Udupa & Pohjonen, 2019). One important motivation for posting on social media is a desire to create likes and shares and receive replies, which can create a tendency to lean towards writing extreme comments that are designed to provoke (Rambukkana, 2015). The result here can be that nuanced issues become lost in an amusing meme or gif, where even the most complex social and political matter can be made accessible to all, reduced to easy symbolism, humorous digs and buzzwords (Davis et al., 2018).

How we tend to use social media also limits rational and careful discussion of issues. When we post on social media, we are unlikely to carefully consider what has already been said and ideas expressed in feeds we follow, nor do we consider the extent ideas vary across individual posts (Ott, 2017). While we may respond in a way that is triggered by familiar, simplified narratives and buzzwords, or as a response to the mood or affect of a feed, it is likely we do so as we are doing other things, like standing in a queue for a sandwich (Bratslavsky et al., 2019). We may use a number of platforms or posts about a number of related things at the same time on fast moving feeds. The point is, we may neither carefully think through what we are posting, nor have a deep commitment to it (Foxman & Wolf, 2013) and not greatly consider the consequences of what we post (Groshek & Cutino, 2016). Since we likely operate in habitual networks of ideas and opinions, all might seem rather familiar anyway (Bouvier & Cheng, 2019) where social and political debate is a kind of clicktivism or slacktivism (Karpf, 2010), requiring little effort, commitment, or even genuine engagement (Morozow, 2011).

Returning to some of the Weibo examples considered above, we can say that the comments on Trump’s anti-China tweets, with their sarcasm, insults and smart humour, create engagement and mobilization around a simplified narrative, carried out with symbols and buzzwords. We can also add that the fitness experts are a node of users, sharing a set of established notions about fitness and lifestyle – again with well-trodden symbolism and buzzwords. The posts about gender equality deal less in concrete specific issues in Chinese society than with buzzwords about self-fulfilment and success. Looking across the comments, it is hard to tell to whom these things actually refer, how they are brought about, and how these relate to actual lived gender-related social injustices. Rather, the comments are more related to individualistic notions carried by a class of professional workers. The comments gaining most attention appear to be those that provoke through a brutal form of sexism or those produced by a small number of users who show expertise in specific domains.

But what have we not explained here? While we may, on one level, agree with the tenor of the attacks on Trump, the need to address gender equality and even the benefits of fitness regimes, as communications scholars and critical discourse analysts, we need to ask through what discourses are such ideas framed? What assumptions about society, identities and social relations lie buried in these feeds? The literature on the quality of social and political debate is limited, similar to what Billig (1995) argued in regard to nationalism. Just as we need to understand banal nationalism, we need to understand the political that is buried in everyday communication. Many scholars have made just this point in relation to studying politics and ideology. If we really wish to understand the nature of ideologies, then we must look for the ways that these infuse all kinds of activities and processes.

**Banal politics in everyday life**

Scholars from a range of academic traditions have argued for the importance of examining politics in everyday life. Some of this scholarship is less contemporary, but highly relevant to current social media research and to the project of CDS. To understand exactly why popular culture and everyday communication is so vital to study, we consider how this has been approached at different times in academic traditions that share our concerns.

In the late 19th century, a number of thinkers including Mathew Arnold (1960), began to write about popular culture. This research addressed concerns about the rise of a culture distinct from elite culture, it being equated with ‘anarchy’ and the ‘disruptive nature of working-class lived culture’ (1960: 6). The ideas and values it carries were not valued in their own right since they represented ‘low culture’ and something backward, primitive, immoral. Other scholars also began to look at working class cultures in different ways. As cities emerged through industrialization, they experienced new social problems such as crime, murder, psychoses, alcoholism, and suicide. While some dismissed these problems as part of cities’ associated chaos, unruliness, lack of civilized values and immorality, others noted that such problems tended to be in specific parts of cities. Famously, the documentary makers Mayhew and Rawson connected such issues to extreme poverty, social instability and unemployment. In France, the documentary photographers Quételet and Guerry made related observations, also noting that criminal offences tended to relate to urban areas. The point here was that the culture found in these areas needed to be understood as related to localized conditions. Theorists such as Durkheim (1952) and Tönnies (2001) tried to account for the kinds of ideas, values and forms of social bonds that were required to create better social cohesion and organization to prevent issues like family breakdowns and crime. Such work relates to the concerns of CDS. We understand all social phenomena and communication in the context of its social and economic system and dominant forms of social relations. CDS is also interested in revealing underlying ideas and values in communication and this would be from the elites who viewed crime as a symptom of immorality or biological inferiority, with an associated need for punishment.

In 1930s America, the Chicago Sociology School focused its work on trying to understand the ideas and values carried by people in impoverished areas. This group of scholars used ethnography to examine how people in such areas lived out their lives (Cavan, 1983). This became known as a ‘human ecology’ approach (Lutters & Ackerman,1996), a very useful notion we use here to study banal politics. Just as a botanist or biologist study plant and animal species in relation to their habitat or natural surroundings, so the sociologist or the discourse analyst does the same for human behaviour. In our case, we are dealing with social context, wider social structures that include predominant ideas, values and norms (Park et al., 1925).

For the Chicago School, the aim was also to understand how this all made sense to the people in poorer areas. One study in particular captures what this means, and is especially powerful for what we have in mind for this special issue. Frederic Thrasher (1929) studied Chicago gangs based around a culture of crime, violence and brutality. Thrasher revealed that these gangs held ideas, values and norms that were highly consistent with those held within wealthier American social groups at the time. Gang members were ambitious, competitive, sought out success, power, status, wealth and prestigious consumer goods, despite having no opportunities to live out these values through the same routes as middle class people. What we learn from this is that what may look like very different forms of life, sets of motivations, priorities and identities, may be underpinned by the same underlying ideas and values, just realised in different forms in different social contexts.

There is something important for CDS to take from this ‘human ecology’ approach, which has gone on to shape much of sociology. At the time of writing this article, many working-class people were turning towards right-wing populist ideologies (Wodak, 2019). However, there is little research in CDS that examines how these views are meaningful to people in context. The Chicago School would ask how we can explain increasing intolerance to migrants and growing xenophobia, both in terms of the wider social structure as well as how this is meaningful to the people who hold these ideas. Authors such as Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) and Johnson (2020) argue that the easy answer is people are simply racist, uneducated, primitive, even fascist. However, Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) argue that such assumptions are dangerous. They suggest we must understand the appeal of right-wing populism and how this is meaningful to its supporters. As Tyler (2015: 495) argues, ‘the post-industrial working classes not only face precarious employment, downward social mobility, and extreme social insecurity, but endure conditions of ‘heightened stigmatisation [ . . . ] in daily life as well as in public discourse’ (citing Wacquant, 2008: 24–25)’. Giroux (2007: 309) observes ‘as poor minorities of color and class, unable to contribute to the prevailing consumerist ethic, are vanishing into the sinkhole of poverty in desolate and abandoned enclaves of decaying cities [and] neighbourhoods’, they seek out ways of finding meaning. The shift from industrial capitalism to neoliberalism (or financial capitalism) has brought about ‘deepening inequalities of income, health and life chances within and between countries, on a scale not seen since before the Second World War’ (Hall, 2011). Yet, as Bouvier (2020) argues, criticisms of working-class ideologies by middle class Twitter users are more oriented to individual morality, character and lack of education. From a CDS point of view, we would argue there is much more we can learn about ideology here. We can and should carry out critical analyses of the speeches and social media comments of right-wing populist leaders. But we must also analyse how this is meaningful to working class people, and find out more about the wider ideological setting where all this takes place.

Presently, how we formulate social problems in public discourse, where we look for blame, is highly influenced by neoliberal ideology (Johnson 2011). This ideology is mapped on to a political economic model that holds all needs (human and societal) are best met by free markets, free trade and profit making, where the state plays a minimal role (Harvey, 2005: 2). Intangibles such as knowledge, health, and well-being are commodified and part of sweeping processes of privatization and marketization, in education, healthcare, resources, transport, policing, military and land, which were formerly managed by the state (ibid). As Hall (2011) argue, this process drives wealth, resources and opportunities to the top and away from the bottom. Johnson (2011, 2020) argues that our present understandings of rising right-wing populism must be situated into our present social structure, infused with neoliberalism with its ideas and values of individualism, success, devaluing of the state and welfare. Here ‘equality’ relates more to the rights of individuals to be successful, to express their identities, than issues lying deeper in our social structures and systems of ideas and values.

From the ‘human ecology’ approach, we need to understand right-wing populism as people making their lives meaningful in specific social contexts, using the ideas, values and norms all around them and in the context of how the new neoliberal order positions them. We also need to understand the accounts of right-wing populism given by the elite in the same way. As we saw, formerly the elite saw crime and breakdown in social order as related to immorality or primitivism. This can be understood in the context of ideas and values held at the time, infused into all parts of society. For Johnson (2020), the same would be the case for the present middle classes.

Studying banal politics with an ‘ecological approach’ reveals the buried political ideas in the most mundane of everyday forms of communication and looks deep into more obvious forms of socio-political commentary. We introduced this paper with examples from Weibo criticising Trump through clever memes and sarcasm, representing ‘us’ against America. We also considered fitness gurus equating health with getting ahead and managing all parts of our lives. In an ecological sense, both these social media feeds are populated by a new Chinese middle class who find themselves in a specific and novel social and political milieu. They form a class of people who live in a society where former Confucian ideas and values about self-denial, family and social responsibility persist (Guo, 2017). Yet they have been deliberately groomed by the state to foster economic growth and social modernization (Zhang, 2020). They are oriented to the acquisition of wealth and status, but also Western ideas of individualism and a drive for success embedded in neoliberalism (Guo, 2017). In a European context at least, this new consumer and normative middle class ‘is the neoliberal subject par excellence’, mobilized as a ‘form of governmentality, through (and against) which judgements about class-others are produced’ (Tyler, 2015: 500).

Our question here is: to what extent do we need to understand the Weibo comments about Trump and fitness as part of this specific moment in China, where these new ideologies are becoming embedded, albeit with a local favour? Furthermore, with Weibo, we have the affordances of social media that foster simplifications, easy symbolism and bring to the surface that which might be most funny, sarcastic and likely to be shared. Memes, insults, sarcasm and trolling, as Merrin (2019: 201) notes, have now ‘become central to our political processes, spreading through the mainstream to become one of the most important forms of political participation and activism today, employed by politicians, political commentators and the public alike’. This has become how many of us now experience the very nature of doing social and political debate (Dean, 2010). In this special issue, we want to foreground the need to look at communication on social media, taking an ecological approach, placing comments in contexts of places, social formations, as well as prevailing discourses, and as being mindful of how social media platforms steer and shape how this takes place.

**Researching ideology in popular culture**

There has been a tradition, founded in Marxist thinking and the Frankfurt School in particular, which has established a critical approach to popular culture. We find this in the work of Theodore Adorno’s (1941) criticism of popular music. He argued that capitalism had standardized music based around relatively fixed and repeating selling points. This was also dressed-up in a kind of ‘pseudo individualization’ that helps to drive passive consumption, and trivial lyrics that carry meanings that confirm the world as it is. Such music may present itself as being rebellious and anti-mainstream, yet ultimately fosters acts of consumption and serve the capitalist system (Street, 1988).

Louis Althusser (2005) argued that ideas and values that maintain and naturalize the capitalist system and its injustices were maintained, not only by official state institutions, but by being deeply inscribed in everyday ways of thinking and living, including advertising and leisure activities, all which favour elite ideologies. Products and consumption patterns are infused with ideas and values related to capitalist social organization and the identities that are required for its maintenance. Antonio Gramsci (1971) was interested in how the cultural industries in general (film, radio and other entertainment media) carry what on the surface appear to be competing views of the world and events, but yet in ways never fundamentally present a challenge to the basis of the existing social order. Raymond Williams (1963: 313) argued that popular culture in the form of media, entertainment and consumption is the best way to research and understand what he called a society’s ‘structure of feeling’ – in other words, its dominant ideas and values.

Influenced by this Marxist thinking, Roland Barthes’ book *Mythologies* (1957) was ground-breaking in the critical study of popular culture. Looking at a range of everyday objects such as wine, food, sport and detergents, he demonstrated how these carry ideas and values about identities and priorities that, again, favour a lack of critical thinking and support existing forms of social organisation. Following Barthes, Will Wright (1975) looked at Hollywood Western movies, demonstrating that over time their stories, character types, and the challenges they face mirrored broader shifts in American society and politics. These movies embody values such as individualism, team-work and even corporatism.

The work of Michel Foucault (1989), highly influential in CDS, has also been important in how we think about the ideological in the everyday, including popular culture. For Foucault, knowledge in society is deeply linked to the power of the elite. Such knowledge shapes and limits what we say and how we say things. Knowledge and evaluation are built into all material culture, our bodies and identities. It is manifested in how we design social spaces and infused into the practices of central institutions, schools, medicine, and law. In this way, the kind of neoliberal sense of democracy linked to consumption, personal success, and individualism, can run through Weibo posts about Trump, comments about gender equality, fitness and self-management.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu (1979) has also been hugely influential in the study of popular culture, particularly in sociology. His work allows us to think about how products, leisure and entertainment are related to power, through the way the idea of ‘taste’ governs the status of a person. Bourdieu argued that what shapes taste, likes, preferences, habits, forms of knowledge, is something we acquire through our social context(s). This forms what Bourdieu calls our ‘habitus’ (1979: 169). These can be thought of as lifestyles, comprised of local ideas, values and beliefs, and those of the wider social structure. For Bourdieu, crucially, some social groups have the power to have their own habitus and tastes defined as higher status. So, middle class people and elites, who have power over institutions and media, are able to define art, poetry, and classical music as high status, as well as other aspects of their habitus, such as forms of self-expression and moral values. Gaining power or status in a social structure may therefore mean taking on the taste and habitus that is attributed to higher status.

Bourdieu’s observations on taste are highly relevant in the context of contemporary Chinese culture where scholars note a drive for the new middle classes to take on more Western markers of taste and distinction, which orients to notions of success, education, arts, music as well as signals of having ‘modern’, more cosmopolitan values (Zhang, 2020; Dong, 2018). Here the consumption of goods, as well as identity and social values associated with Western individualism and neoliberalism, fuse with taste and status (Guo, 2017: 323). Bourdieu and Foucault point out for us to examine not just blatant instances of socio-political commentary to understand ideologies in society. Rather, we must look for how these are imprinted into everyday life, how they shape and inform how we communicate about things, what we value, how we go about showing the kinds of people we are, how status and value are negotiated.

If we are ridiculing Donald Trump on Weibo by making memes where his head looks like a virus, then what kinds of discourses about politics or international relations run through this? And in these discourses, what is missing? foregrounded? added? rearranged? As we vent our anger, show our smartness, get some likes and feel part of a collective, what kinds of markers of status and power are in operation? If we leave comments on Weibo as we follow a fitness regime with rigorous disciplined routines, aligned with fitness products and other lifestyle indicators, as a segment of managing all parts of our lives, what kinds of discourses, markers of taste, and identity underpin this? From Foucault’s point of view, the comments on Trump and the fitness regime would be infused by the same ideology.

**Contemporary studies of popular culture**

In 1980s Britain, there was a wave of studies of popular culture in relation to ideology. This was driven by the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies led by Stuart Hall and Paul Hogart. The interest here lay in how news, drama and light entertainment reproduced views of dominant groups in society. Amongst other things, they demonstrated how police and crime dramas failed to place actual crime into social contexts. Sit-coms and soap operas offered limited views of working class life. News and magazine programming represented a highly uncritical view of society, where inequalities and their causes remained invisible. Throughout the 80s and 90s, studies of popular entertainment such as films, television drama, soap operas and sit-coms continued (e.g. Gitlin, 1979; Schlesinger et al., 1983; Ryan & Kellner, 1988; Devereux, 1998). Collectively, this body of work shows how highly ideological views of the world naturalized or backgrounded social inequalities and major injustices. They revealed how popular culture represented corporatism, consumerism, global capitalism and Western geo-political activities in a neutral way, as simply taken for granted.

This legacy has continued in the work of Biressi and Nunn (2008), Skeggs and Wood (2012), Tyler (2015) and Eriksson (2015), who examine how lifestyle television, reality programming, and documentaries represent working class people. These people are ridiculed and judged in terms of a lack of taste and middle class social competencies. Life situations of struggle are evaluated in neoliberal terms of poor self-management, laziness, and lack of drive for success, thereby sketching a kind of undeserving underclass, some of this concealed in humour, comedy and fun (Eriksson, 2015). A limited amount of work has also been carried out on video games with similar results. These entertainment products may be designed for fun, to engage and to be immersive, though they have also been shown to promote ideas and values related to consumer lifestyles, entrepreneurship, individualism, and freedom of choice, where players deal with all challenges and problems as an ‘enterprising self’ (Baerg, 2014;Pérez-Latorre & Besalu, 2016). What we see in this literature on popular entertainment is how it becomes not simply a set of overt political beliefs, but a way of thinking and feeling about who we are, how things are to be done, and through what means.

**Critical Discourse Studies and banal politics**

It has been argued that CDS should work more in the realm of the popular to reveal how dominant ideologies are disseminated and maintained. Popular culture is where we most experience politics ‘as fun, as style, and simply as part of the taken for granted everyday world…. [though] all these different levels of communicative activity are infused by and shaped by, power relations and ideologies’ (Machin, 2013: 347). Though dismissed by some as not a ‘serious’ area of study, for Van Leeuwen (2014: 290) ‘the power of such representations [in popular culture] lies precisely in the fact that their ideological meanings can be so easily denied by arguments such as that ‘it is only a story’, or ‘only a toy’…’ (Van Leeuwen, 2014: 290).

There is limited research in this area, yet what there is compellingly points to the need for such work. In terms of entertainment media, Wodak’s (2010) study of a television series illustrates how stories in popular culture are politically powerful, simplifying and misrepresenting complex issues. Such representations foster ‘dissatisfaction with liberal democratic processes, bring about feelings of insecurity, and foster a seeking for new charismatic leaders’ (Wodak 2010: 186). Other studies include late-night satirical TV talk shows (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013), Marvel comic strips (Veloso and Bateman, 2013; Wodak and Forchtner, 2014), factual crime reports (Machin and Mayr, 2012) and popular music (Way, 2018). All these point to worldviews and ideologies that are buried in entertainment, fun and, as Way (2018) points out, some are even aligned with ideas of rebellion and alternative cultures. These ideologies legitimize and naturalize existing social relations and decontextualize, simplify or individualize social problems.

There have been limited studies of technology. Roderick (2016b) has looked at a Disney theme park attraction to show how technology is represented as fundamentally improving family life, providing a highly ideological view of what comprises good interpersonal relations, pleasure, and success. Machin and Van Leeuwen (2016) studied the world presented by video games on mobile phones, showing that while they were clearly gendered, they were also set in a decontextualized world that fostered fast achievement, go-getting, self-betterment and enterprising selves. Ledin and Machin (2021) have shown how the software and databases used to manage and administer organizations, themselves can create locked-down systems that have huge discursive power over what takes place in work practices.

Some Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies (MCDS) have considered how ideologies are coded into material objects and space. For example, Abousnnouga and Machin (2010) examine war monuments and sites of heritage, considering how forms, shapes, symbolism and language serve to legitimize wars carried out in the name of corporate and economic interests, nationalism, freedom, justice and democracy. Roderick (2016a) looks at the changing designs of workplaces and how these reflect shifts to impermanent contracts, multi-roles and the ideas of teamwork and ‘innovation’. Ledin and Machin (2018) also examine the designs of classrooms, museums, management training environments and restaurants, showing how certain ideas and values of neoliberalism are coded into all of them. In this volume, the authors argue that it is not so much popular culture that should be the site where we draw out buried ideologies, but the entirety of our material and communications culture.

**Counter discourses**

While the critical tradition of cultural studies, inspired by Stuart Hall, sought to draw out the ideology buried in popular entertainment media, it was at the same time oriented toward people in a society who might contest such discourses. This was influenced by Gramsci’s (1971) notion of ‘hegemony’, which holds that in any society there are always competing ideologies, though one tends to dominate. In cultural studies during the 1980s and 1990s, this led to a wave of ‘reception studies’ of entertainment media, including examining how viewers negotiated with worldviews expressed in news/magazine type programmes (Morely and Brunsdon, 1998), women’s romantic fiction (Radway, 1994), and popular music (Willis, 1990). These studies challenged the idea of the masses simply being passive consumers who are easily duped.

In CDS, this principle has been followed, although seldom. Studies of American satirical television demonstrate how these can represent and challenge hegemonic discourses by poking fun at people and institutions with power, and their biases and faults (Gilbert, 2004; Santa Ana, 2009). Way (2018) claims that popular music, and popular culture more broadly, especially in restrictive regimes, is where people are exposed to, and can consider, views and perspectives not sanctioned by those in power. Way (2021) has shown that online satirists expose the shortcomings of not only UK and US politicians and their policies, but also those on the Left.

KhosraviNik (2017) has argued that social media provide just this opportunity to look at counter discourses. They also allow us to look at how ideologies are carried in different ways and to different degrees. Bouvier (2020) points out that what on one level can look very much like a counter discourse that is challenging hegemony – or what social media research calls ‘voices from below’ (Castells, 2015; Tufekci, 2017) – can at a deeper level carry forms of expressions and evaluations that serve its very maintenance. The criticisms of Trump by Chinese Weibo users might be viewed in this light. The women fitness gurus position themselves against hegemonic notions of femininity, but at the same time communicate through a go-getting enterprising self, presenting themselves through the appropriate codes for middle class taste and modernity. Wood (1998) argued that in cultural studies the idea that discourses were negotiated and countered took over from the overall project of identifying the dominant and underlying ideologies themselves. So on social media, we need to be attentive to how ideologies sit below the surface. And in the tradition of CDS and MCDS, this is exactly what we have been good at doing.

In conclusion, this special issue argues for the importance and value of looking for politics in all kinds of social media comments and platforms, not so much in terms of formal politics, but in terms of political ideologies. This means looking deeper at all individual instances, even if at first glance they appear ‘counter’ or ‘voices from below’. It means an ecological approach, where all communication takes place in particular social formations at moments in time. In practical terms, this means that as well as studying communication, we embrace literature that provides insights into those, whether that means right now in China, or in the US, where there are specific histories and configurations of discourses of populism, xenophobia and neoliberalism.

**In this issue**

Contributors examine a wide range of social media posts that may be considered funny, entertaining, mundane, serious or/ and banal. Despite this diversity, each analysis reveals how our everyday social media feeds are ideological, whether these represent current political and social issues, lifestyle choices, body functions or food. Andrea Mayr and Simon Statham examine popular crime discourses articulated in users’ responses to the Mo Robinson people smuggling case on Facebook. Employing MCDS alongside Martin and White’s (2005) Appraisal theory, they reveal ideological themes in posts where participants evaluate and judge crime, perpetrator and victims. They demonstrate that although social media has the potential to challenge and shift traditional narratives about crime, it can also perpetuate and even amplify ideological narratives of crime control that fail to address wider socio-political and structural contexts in which crime occurs.

Another social issue that sees traditional narratives perpetuated in social media is ‘Scrounger-bashing’. James Morrison considers how ‘anti-welfare’ discourses that are embedded in UK society and fuelled by the news media, political communication, and popular culture also find their way into comments on completely unrelated websites. This research differs from most scholarly attention that has focused on tabloid newspapers, political rhetoric, ‘poverty porn’ television, or mainstream social media platforms, such as Twitter and newspaper comment threads. Here, Morrison examines how normative anti-welfare discourses infiltrate everyday communication in the niche consumer forums of *pistonheads.com* (news, reviews and premium car sales site), *avforums.com* (news, reviews and discussions of audio-visual home consumer electronics), and *landlord-referencing.co.uk* (membership-based website for tenant referencing). Morrison demonstrates how dominant government discourses seep into these discussions in obvious and less-obvious ways.

Though social media has the potential to disseminate facts, it can also purposefully misinform and/or spread conspiratorial information. Covid-19 exemplifies this. Bradley E. Wiggins considers how Instagram posts with the hashtag #CivilWar2 spreads conspiracy theories about the pandemic. He identifies two main categories of memes and analyses these within the prisms of genre, discourse/representation, and style. Results from a critical discourse analysis show that within modern American conspiratorial thinking, healthy scepticism is replaced with conspiracy and an absence of theory.

Users also employ social media to explore aspects of our bodies, and two of our articles consider this. Maria Tomlinson considers how memes not only perpetuate but also challenge dominant views on menstruation. Her research is temporally situated as menstruation has become increasingly visible and politicised on social media, driven by menstrual activists who strive to delegitimise ideologies that construct menstruating women as leaking, irrational, and out of control. Creating menstrual memes increases its public visibility in order to destigmatise it. Drawing on theories about humour and ideology, Tomlinson unearths discourses articulated in Instagram memes. Although many continue to perpetuate stigma, a significant number use humour to problematise or subvert harmful ideologies whilst normalising menstruation and reducing societal stigma.

Bouvier and Chen also examine social media posts about the body. Using a social semiotic approach, they analyse women fitness experts/ influencers posts on Chinese Weibo. They find posts construct a harmonized world where all parts of life are managed by making the right choices and having a ’striving’ attitude. Success and happiness become tasks to be worked upon in a decontextualized world where there is no room for actual situations and dispositions. These ideas are linked to rising neoliberal beliefs, values and identities among the Chinese middle classes, used to create an overdetermined stance against more traditional Confucian women’s roles that provide few resources for representing those who seek other kinds of identities and ways of life. But this rhetoric of empowerment, getting-ahead, and choice leaves little room for sharing the actual restrictions, conflicts and struggles faced by these women.

Nationalism and politicians are also topics (and targets) of social media users. Two of our articles examine this expressed in online musical offerings. Louis Strange and Liam Ó hÍr consider the Irish nationalism articulated in music videos on YouTube by West Belfast rappers Kneecap, whose lyrics and visuals challenge more conservative notions of Irish nationalism. They draw on a theoretical framework that integrates Fox and Miller-Idriss’ (2008) “everyday nationhood” perspective with Banerjee’s (2012) “muscular nationalism” to draw attention to the gendered history of Irish Republicanism. Adopting a MCDS approach, they argue that these everyday texts not only reproduce Irish Republicanism, but centre normatively masculine identities in appeals to nationalist ideology, setting Kneecap apart from previous incarnations of “muscular nationalism”.

Lyndon C.S. Way considers how Brexit is recontextualised in a musical mash up that uses as its sources a popular music video, excerpts from a politician’s speech, and footage from public engagements to ridicule Jacob Rees-Mogg, a dominant UK politician closely associated with Brexit. Though at first glance the mash up may be dismissed as a chance for users to laugh at Brexit and politicians, leaning on MCDS, Way demonstrates how logically structured political arguments are side-lined in favour of entertaining, affective and populist discourses. It is through such a close reading that Way considers the role(s) such digital popular culture plays in our understanding of politics during users’ endless search to be entertained online.

Situated in research that demonstrates bonds between right-wing populism and social media, Demuru demonstrates how populist features such as anti-elitism, nationalism and people-centrism are manifested in the representation of leaders’ private lives and everyday habits. Demuru demonstrates how politicians Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro use social media to pose as “the everyday man” in food posts on their social media accounts. Combining discursive semiotics and MCDS, Demuru demonstrates how food images allow these politicians to strategically communicate features such as being close to the common people, nationalism, humbleness and authenticity. Food posts appear to be an ideological tool through which right-wing populism is communicated as a soft, safe and worthwhile political ideology.

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