

“As Much As I Love You, I’ll Never Get You to Understand”: Political Discourse and ‘Face’ Work on Facebook

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1 Introduction

The rise of the Internet has created a popular avenue for people to discuss political and social topics (Holt 2004; Puopolo 2001). In recent years, social networking sites such as Facebook.com have created new and rich territory for exploring online discourse unprecedented in the history of Internet communication. Since it was first launched in 2004, Facebook has become widely used by billions of people. In December 2013, the number of monthly active users surpassed 1.23 billion (Facebook 2013). With the growing popularity of the social network site over the past decade, the potential for individuals to engage in online discourse about political topics has rapidly increased.

Individuals use the features of Facebook to present their best impression to others in their social circles and to attract attention or to ward off undesired contacts (Tong & Walther 2011). As a result, computer mediated discourse (CMD) on Facebook has become integral to the initiation, development, and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. CMD facilitated by Facebook allows users to connect with their family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, acquaintances, and even strangers by publicly posting information that they would otherwise share in traditional face-to-face settings. The hybrid nature of Facebook communication provides opportunities for both passive and active information exchanges. Users are able to actively engage one another in direct conversations while everyone in their individual networks can passively observe. Therefore, this semi-public exchange of information not only enables users to form or break bonds through active discussion, but it also serve to enhance or diminish the social bonds of non-participants through the passive observation of self-disclosed information.

Many scholars have investigated the role of CMD in the online discussion of politics (cf. Brundidge 2006; Davis 1999; Holt 2004). Most scholarship concerning the influence of this new technology on political behavior has focused on its ability to cause negative consequences for offline social interactions (Kraut et al. 1998), how it can be used to take advantage of individual privacy (Gross & Acquisti 2005; Hewitt & Forte 2006; Kraut et al. 1998; Stutzman 2006), or the possibility that it is an extension of unidirectional mass

communication used by political elites to manipulate public agenda (Bimber & Davis 2003; Ward & Gibson 2003; Williams & Gullati 2007). However, this research does not examine the role of politeness strategies used by individuals when engaging in online political discussion to meet these goals.

According to Mills (2006: 3), politeness is defined as “the expression of speakers’ intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts toward one another.” Goffman (1989: 5) defines ‘face’ as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact.” Politeness in social interaction therefore can be characterized by attempts by interlocutors to save face for one another. Previous studies in politeness theory and political science (Brown & Levinson 1987; Barber 1984) maintain that perfect strangers are not likely to engage in discourse about politics because doing so may result in a face-threatening act. In this paper, however, we provide evidence that discourse about politics does in fact commonly occur in Facebook communication regardless of the possibility of a face threatening act occurring. Moreover, we show that discourse about politics on Facebook can be a means of socialization and one way to express attitudes and opinions about reality (Östman 2013) as well as a medium to establish and negotiate an online identity (Foucault 1988; ‘me-forming’, Naaman et al. 2009).

This study applies the principles of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1987; Wierzbicka 1991) as well as computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA, cf. Herring 2001, 2004, 2014) to explore the politeness strategies used by individuals to engage in discourse about politics on Facebook. This research has important implications for politeness theory, discourse about politics, and CMD in that it suggests that online political discussion on Facebook has become a new way to establish and negotiate an online identity and therefore requires new politeness strategies for maintaining face.

2 Methods and Data Analysis

In this study, we qualitatively analyze 10 Facebook wall posts (six of which are discussed in this paper) containing discourse about politics. The identities of the Facebook users who participated in this study were anonymized; however, the wall posts were otherwise left unchanged. Following Herring (2004), we use a CMDA approach to carry out a language-focused content analysis of the data. Using this approach, we adopt the following three theoretical assumptions that underlie CMDA (Herring 2004):

1. Discourse exhibits regular patterns.
2. Discourse involves speaker choices.
3. Computer-mediated discourse may be, but is not inevitably, shaped by the technological features of computer-mediated communication systems.

In analyzing the data, we also paid special attention to features of politeness (cf. Brown & Levinson 1987; Wierzbicka 1991). The method for analyzing politeness in this paper distinguishes between two types of politeness: ‘positive politeness’ and ‘negative politeness.’ Negative politeness is characterized by behavior that aims to protect one or both participants’ ‘negative face’, or “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others” (Brown & Levinson 1987: 62). In discourse about politics in CMD, violations of negative politeness include behaviors such as posting excessively long, low-content messages than normally considered acceptable. Observations of negative politeness can include apologies for or summaries of longer or lower-content messages before or after they are posted. On the other hand, positive politeness is “the desire to be ratified, understood, approved of, liked or admired” (Brown

& Levinson 1987: 62). Violations of positive politeness in discourse about politics in CMD include behaviors such as posting hostile and abusive message content, commonly referred to as ‘flaming’ in net jargon (Kiesler et al. 1985; Kim & Raja 1990; Shapiro & Anderson 1985). Observations of positive politeness can include expressions of thanks and appreciation and other behaviors generally intended to make others feel supported and accepted. They can also include the use of nicknames and, humor, and hedging to close the social distance between interlocutors.

According to Herring (1994), behavior associated with both types of politeness is especially likely to occur when speakers engage in ‘face threatening acts’, i.e., “acts that threaten the positive or negative ‘face wants’ of the speaker, addressee, or both” (279). In discourse about politics in CMD, face threatening acts include asking questions that require the addressee to make additional effort or modifications to their behavior, disagreeing with or verbally abusing other participants, and calling attention to participants’ inappropriate online behavior (Herring 1994: 279).

In order to investigate the politeness strategies used in CMD about politics, the data discussed in this paper were coded for positive politeness or negative politeness, and if applicable, whether they constitute a violation or observance of each type of politeness. In the section that follows, we analyze six Facebook wall posts containing discourse about politics using this approach.

3 Results

Our first example Facebook wall post containing CMD about politics is shown in (1) in the conversation between Tammy and Nelson about the 2013 shooting at a naval yard in Washington, DC.

3.1 Wall Post 1

- (1) TAMMY: Obama "our tears are not enough" cry me a f---ing river. Disarming Americans and arming Syrian rebels seems like a terrific plan. He has yet to improve or create a mental health care establishment to help these people that need it. The shooter was reported to be hearing voices. Don't blame guns when it's the government that has turned it's [sic] back on the mentally ill.

NELSON: Tammy, I disagree with most of your comments (And, I'm afraid we are polar opposites). *But, I love your candor. Keep em coming. Good to see you out running the last couple of weeks. You need to come run Big Bend 50 25 10. It involves running and guns.*

In (1), Tammy’s original wall post alone can be considered a positive face threatening act to positive politeness in that it threatens the positive ‘face wants’ of any addressees (whether they become active participants or remain as passive observers in the discussion) who generally consider politics to be a taboo subject for discussion. Thus, Tammy’s original wall post may be perceived as a face threatening act not only by Nelson, a friend of Tammy’s who later comments on the wall post, but also by anyone else on Tammy’s “friends list” who comes across the wall post on Facebook at any time.

Nelson cautiously expresses his dissenting opinion in response to Tammy’s wall post in (1), but also engages in a potential face threatening act. In doing so, however, he mitigates the possible face threatening act by hedging his disagreement with “*But, I love*

your candor.” This demonstrates how initiating discourse about politics in CMD can result in a face threatening act and how interlocutors can mitigate their opinions to maintain the face of their friend.

Nelson also ends his comment with several additional politeness strategies, e.g., changing the topic and mentioning a shared interest (both Tammy and Nelson are marathon runners). Furthermore, Nelson employs humor at the end of his post. Because jokes often require prior text that all participants in the conversation must have access to, they are associated with shared experiences and therefore positive face maintenance. Thus, the politeness strategies used by Nelson to maintain face for Tammy all demonstrate appeals to positive face, closing the social distance originally created by the face threatening act.

3.2 Wall Post 2

In the next Facebook wall post shown in (2), Tammy begins a discussion about the Obamacare penalty, addressing the subset of her friends who identify as “young people.”

- (2) TAMMY: Young people - Obamacare penalty \$95/yr vs. \$250/month for healthcare. Easy decision. Kill the law by avoiding it [...] And if you get a chronic sickness you can buy it later bc policies cannot discriminate against pre-existing condition.

REBECCA: It's cheaper to prevent sickness now than wait until you're already sick *Tam. I love you, but* that's a fact and even if you spend less in the short run by paying the penalty, you'll lose in the long run. And anyway, the penalty is going to increase each year, so again, you'll spend more in the long run. *I'm not saying the law is perfect by any means, but* the law isn't going anywhere - rather than try to kill it, we should be working together to improve it.

Similar to what was observed in (1), Tammy's original post can be seen as a face threatening act to positive politeness in (2), both for addressees who become active participants and for any other people on Tammy's “friends list” who see the post and remain passive observers of the discussion. Rebecca, Tammy's friend, expresses her opposing opinion to the wall post but immediately follows it with Tammy's nickname *Tam*. This politeness strategy is an appeal to positive face because it serves as a reminder that Rebecca and Tammy are members of the same social group. Rebecca's hedged use of the phrase “*I love you, but...*” also serves as a mitigation strategy that is intended to close the social distance between them before widening it again with a dissenting opinion. Additionally, Rebecca ends her argument with the disclaimer “*I'm not saying...*” which further lessens her commitment to the truth-value of her opposing opinions.

3.3 Wall Post 3

In our third example Facebook wall post in (3), the original wall post by Allen concerned Republican Cathy McMorris Rodger's response to President Obama after his 2014 State of the Union address.

- (3) CINDY: I think she did great ! It wasn't Lie, Lie and Lie !!!!!

TOM: I think she'd ensure *anyone named Cindy would be nursing babies, and not commenting on politics.*

CINDY: I think anyone named Tom should live on an Island by himself. *Sorry Allen. I love you honey. Your [sic] like my Son. But your friend is a bit rude.*

TOM: It wasn't an attack Cindy – I was simply applying to you the ideals she embodied; thus, you don't want that option. Wherefore, her response painted the GOP in a deep color of Red that is far from the American idea.

CINDY: *Allen your [sic] still my boy. Sweet dreams. Your [sic] always welcome in my Home with the big Red Door !!! Love u sweetie.*

In (3), Allen openly expresses his political views after which his Facebook friend Cindy openly expresses her dissenting opinion. This creates a potential positive face threatening act to any active participants in the political discourse, including Allen, who disagrees with Cindy's opinion. Tom, who is Allen's Facebook friend but who does not know Cindy, then comments that "*anyone named Cindy would be nursing babies, not commenting on politics.*" Tom directly refers to Cindy with this comment to appeal to her positive face as an attempt to mitigate the earlier potential face threatening act. His probable intention for referring to Cindy by name was to indicate that she is a woman capable of commenting on politics (and not just nursing babies). Unfortunately, Cindy does not recognize Tom's good intentions and she instead retorts back that she thinks "*anyone named Tom should live on an island by himself.*" In fact, Cindy instead appeals to Allen's (rather than Tom's) positive face by saying words like "*Sorry Allen. I love you honey.*" and "*Your [sic] like my son.*" to close the social distance potentially created by the positive face threatening act. She also hedges her disagreement with Tom by saying "*But your friend is rude.*" Tom once more tries to appeal to Cindy's positive face by explaining that his earlier comment wasn't an attack but rather an illustration. However, his face strategies are in vain as Cindy continues instead to appeal to Allen's positive face by saying "*Your [sic] always welcome in my Home with the big Red Door !!! Love u sweetie*", showing that she is more concerned about repairing the social relationship with the person she knows well and is close to rather than with the person she doesn't know at all.

3.4 Wall Post 4

In (4), Karen, a protest organizer and Sarah's family member, initiates a political discussion about a union protest in North Carolina that sought to raise wages for fast food employees to \$15 per hour.

- (4) SARAH: So if they want to make the same amount as skilled laborers, then why aren't they protesting for more affordable skills training? Or a more transparent and objective promotion/raise process? \$15/hr is much more than a living wage in most parts of the country, and not everyone deserves to make that much. What will the managers make? There are college graduates who aren't making that much, as a simple factor of the economy.

KAREN: I'm convinced that there are people who will never get this. If you've never had to pay to completely take care of yourself, you cannot know. If in your adult life nobody had ever provided your vehicle and insurance, a roof over your head and food in the fridge you just don't have a frame of reference for this conversation. Sarah, *as much as I love you*, I will never be able to get you to understand the harsh realities of life for the 99% (unemployed college grads like myself included), so I won't even try anymore. Your comments tell me that *you are still a wonderful, smart young woman with an incredibly bright future* and this is not something you're going to learn. So when I post about labor rights being human rights; let it go right on past you!

In (4), Karen, as the initiator of the political discussion, is doing the face work (as opposed to a subsequent commenter) in order to manage positive face. By contrast, Sarah presents an opposing opinion without attempting to mitigate the face threatening act or mend face. Karen's response to this affront can be considered a face threatening act both for positive and negative politeness. She implies that those "*who will never get this*" should "*let it go right on past,*" or, simply put, not comment any further. This is a negative face threatening act to negative face because she is putting pressure on other participants of the discussion (whether active or passive) to perform a specific action. In her face threatening act to positive face, Karen increases the social distance not only between Sarah and herself, but also between potential passive observers of the political discussion by saying "*I'm convinced that there are people who will never get this.*" Interestingly, Karen later appeals to positive face by using the phrase "*I love you*" and issuing compliments to decrease the social distance that she has created between herself and her family member, Sarah, as a result of their discourse about politics.

3.5 Wall Post 5

In our fifth example wall post in (5), Yazmin responds to Sarah's comment in (4):

- (5) YAZMIN: Did you watch the video Sarah? Given the economy, what would you consider to be a "living wage?" Keep in mind that these companies can afford to pay more, they just won't. Since you have tagged these good people as unskilled, what do you think they are worth? What are their services worth?

The example in (6) shows Yazmin's ensuing response after she realizes that Karen and Sarah are related.

- (6) YAZMIN: *lol...* I have a niece like that. She's down for the cause as long as she can stay on the outside and post bail. She'll do a rally but I'll just have to inform her really well so that she's not chanting something like "Save the whales!!!" at a JOBS rally. *Bless her heart.*

In (6), instead of closing the social distance she's created with Sarah, Yazmin appeals to Karen's positive face by saying that she has similar annoying relatives. She also diffuses the situation with humor. Thus, the exchanges in (5) and (6) further exemplify how people are more concerned with maintaining the face of people they know than the people they might offend.

3.6 *Passive Observers and Political Identity*

The exchange in (7) below took place in a private message on Facebook in response to the previous series of wall posts containing political discussion between Sarah and Karen (cf. 4-6). This conversation takes place between Sarah and John (who is also a family member of Karen) and illustrates why some passive observers consciously choose not to participate in the speech community of those who discuss politics on Facebook.

- (7) JOHN: I agree with u 150%. Kim and I had a "discussion" about it on the day of the march. The unfortunate truth is that some people think with their pain and not their brain. Fast food work is NOT worth \$15.00 an hour and they know it. But there's no use debating an issue with someone who is so emotionally tied to their point that they cannot think straight.

SARAH: I think so too, which is why I said my peace and walked away.

The example in (7) also demonstrates another way that people can construct their online identities. In this example, John chooses to opt out of the political conversation because he does not want to be antagonized by those who have differing political views. This exchange provides further evidence that political opinions are closely tied with one's identity and that interlocutors are aware that discussing political opinions can affect interpersonal relationships.

4 Summary

As we have demonstrated in our data analysis, political discourse does indeed occur on Facebook despite the possibility of a face threatening act occurring (Brown & Levinson 1987). Furthermore, the results of our data analysis suggest that online political discourse on Facebook has become a new way to establish and negotiate an online identity and therefore requires new strategies for maintaining 'face.' Politeness strategies are socialization tools and are one way that online interlocutors can express attitudes and opinions about reality.

Since Facebook provides opportunities for both active and passive information exchanges, this semi-public exchange of information not only enables users to form or break bonds through active discussion, but it also serve to enhance or diminish the social bonds of non-participants through the passive observation of self-disclosed information. Our data also shows that instead of participating in exchanges where face threatening acts may occur, some Facebook users may choose to "opt out" of such online conversations altogether. This suggests that even passive observers of online discussion about politics are consciously aware of the negative consequences such discourse can have on their interpersonal relationships.

The preliminary findings discussed in this paper provide a first step toward understanding the changing interpersonal relationships in today's increasingly socio-culturally diverse, globalized, and digitally-savvy society. There are many interesting avenues of research that could be undertaken next including exploring the hybrid nature of Facebook communication (i.e., as a mix between simulated face-to-face and internet message board interaction) as well as linking communities of practice to how likely users are to discuss politics.

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