

Indexicality in Online Texts: A Study of Voices

or: Who is speaking?
How do we know?
Why does it matter?

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tumblr.



You use emojis like a straight person

 Anonymous

this is the worst thing anyone has ever said to me

tumblr.



You use emojis like a straight person

 Anonymous

this is the worst thing anyone has ever said to me

💀💀💀 i would die if someone said this to me lmao. when you write a book about tumblr language you should put a screenshot of this on the cover. somehow this sums up everything imo

Indexicality

the property whereby *formal features of language** point to (index) social contexts, identities, and characteristics.

*formal features of language: the form of an utterance; *how* it is spoken or written (e.g. aspects of accent, dialect, register, style, intonation, typography, orthography, etc.)

**Who is
Speaking?**

**How do we
know?**

**Why does it
matter?**

What voices (characters, narrator, imagined author) animate the text?

.

How are the identities/character of these voices constructed or inferred?

.

What work do these voices do in terms of shaping the meaning of the text and/or influencing engagement with it?


The Stakes of the indexicality of form

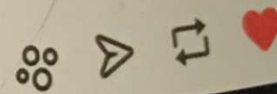
- The stylistic features used to voice ideologically opposed characters can reveal and propagate moral logics that are not otherwise readily apparent, offering insight into online actors' emerging commitments before they crystallize into legible social and political movements.
- Readers make value-laden inferences about the imagined maker of a data visualization based solely on its design features, offering insight into the growing challenge of public data communication amongst polarized audiences that increasingly disavow the validity of science itself.

tumblr.

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 tumblr made me think about a lot of things but mostly social justice and my eyebrows



357,595 notes

“[Tumblr] shaped like all my beliefs about being and doing good in the world.”

— Elliot, 21

Character Dialogues

reported speech (giving voice to figures, fictive or otherwise) can embed evaluations in a narrative (Goffman, 1974; Labov, 1972) and allow authors to take up moral positions through the interplay of these voices (Hill, 1995; Keane, 2011).



boring old people: There are two sexes.
Kids these days just want to be special.
Biology says...

me n my fellow enby teens: biological sex is
a lie that falsely reifies non-existent
binaries. we will wear flower crowns and
swallow the social construction of gender
whole n you can get reckt



me, a literal minor: so uh,, the latest
episode y'all,,, was really uncomfy n
homophobic? and wasnt um,, super
okay,, maybe y'all could address that ?

freaks: HO;W dare you, itS ArT!..
stoPp;bulLying Creates.,ToRS!;!!

Playful Hero

Gleefully disrupts categories that maintain social hierarchies.

1. **Non-standard** conventions of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.
2. **Marginal** formal features features associated language varieties that lack institutional prestige and/or are associated with marginalized social groups.
3. **Heteroglossic** in register and style.
4. **Amalgam** of aesthetics, genres, and imagery.

Standardizing Villain

A rigid adherent to a Standard that perpetuate inequity.

1. **Standard** punctuation, capitalization, and grammatical norms.
2. **Cliché**, and repetitive and/or common phrases.



boring old people: There are two sexes.
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stoPp;bulLying Creates.,ToRS!;!!

Soft Hero

1. **Non-standard** conventions of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.
2. **Marginal** formal features features associated language varieties that lack institutional prestige and/or are associated with marginalized social groups
3. **Diminutive** lexicon associated with young children
4. **Hedging** through punctuation and phrasing



Deviant Villain

1. **Irregular** orthography, iconically transcribing nonsensical variations in pitch and stress

**these patterns of
stylistic variation
implicitly advance
two conflicting
approaches to
social justice:**

- The first moral narrative emphasizes the moral necessity of disrupting categories and hierarchies that maintain the structures and narratives that perpetuate inequity.
- The second emphasizes the moral necessity of protecting vulnerable and marginalized innocents from deviant Others.

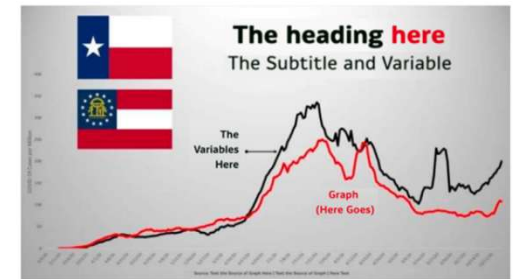
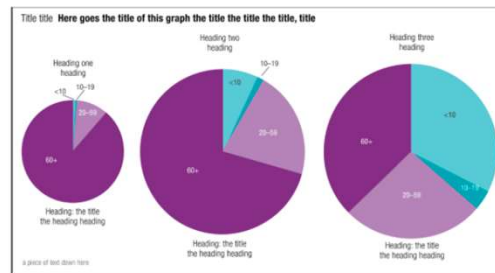
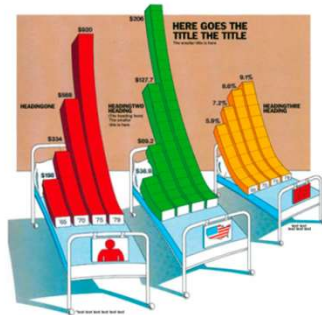
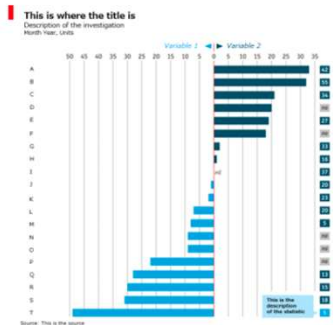
Even *without* the context of data–topic, readers make nuanced indexical associations between an image’s design features, and the identities & characteristics of its imagined maker.

S12-OB “Microsoft Office Vibes”

S2-OB “New Yorker Cartoon”

S4-OB “Someone’s Presentation”

S16-OB “Boomer on Facebook”



“This looks like something I would see on like a government website, the kind of website without a big budget for visual graphics.”

“Looks like someone took data from Excel and had Microsoft Word make a graph out of the data. It’s very generic like, it’s very Microsoft office. Hardcore Microsoft Office vibes. A bureaucrat made this. Or their administrative assistant..”

“This is the graph equivalent of like a New Yorker cartoon. The person who made this probably has a Facebook account where they chew out their uncle for not agreeing with them on political beliefs, and have 3hr long arguments with their sister, who is Republican.”

“This has a more traditional look, like The Times or Nat[ional] Geo[graphic].”

“I would expect this to be on someone’s business presentation.”

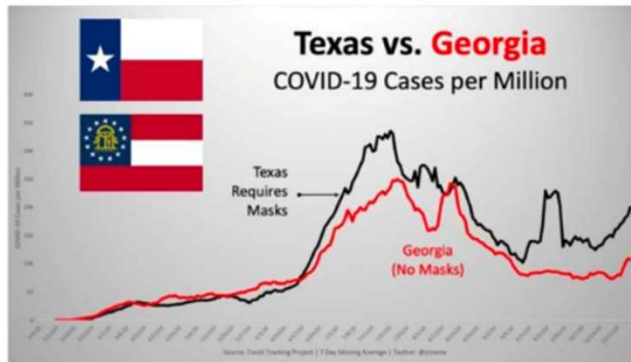
“This looks like something someone like me would make. Someone who has some idea of what a decent presentation looks like, but it is not necessarily what they primarily do. They’re reasonably trustworthy. I feel like pie charts, in general, I just get more neutral vibes from than line charts or bar graphs.”

“This looks like something a man would make. I have no basis for this. It just looks like something a man would make. They are probably right wing. This kind of looks like something a Texas Republican (legislator) would put on Twitter or on their website, or as part of a campaign presentation. Who is doing this [data collection]? Your uncle?”

“This looks like something a Boomer put on Facebook.”

SOURCE: The Federalist

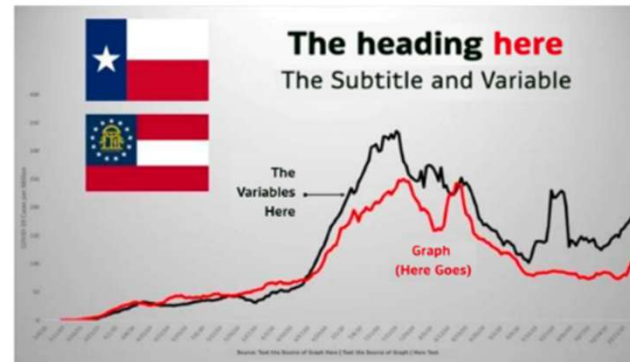
ORIGINAL IMAGE



“Are the axes upside down? Because I've seen misleading plots where the axes were upside down, and that did not make sense based on how COVID works. Obviously this is right wing. [...] Like right-wing conspiracy theory levels of the whole COVID thing. Makes me extremely suspicious of your collection methods. You are only trying to reinforce the echo chamber of COVID is a hoax and I have no idea how you got your data but I don't trust it.”

“This looks like something a man would make. I have no basis for this. It just looks like something a man would make. They are probably right wing. This kind of looks like something a Texas Republican (legislator) would put on Twitter or on their website, or as part of like a campaign presentation. It says Covid Tracking Project. Who is doing this tracking? Is this the CDC or is this your uncle?”

TOPIC OBSCURED IMAGE

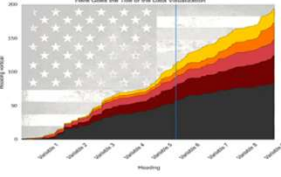
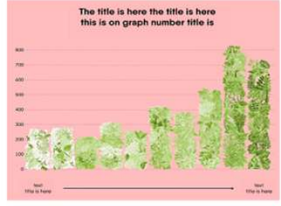


“This does not look like the person who made it knows what they're doing. The design makes me think of someone slightly older who is probably a little bit of a crackpot conspiracy theorist which aligns with the personality traits I chose above”

“I don't actually know what the flags represent but they make me angry. This looks like something a boomer put on Facebook about gay marriage or something”

“I've seen right-wing graphs that look like this and not a lot of left-wing graphs that look like this. It's kind of a theme or a vibe I guess. It also doesn't have a lot of indications about nuances and reminds me of those really unhinged data graphs about like, "x is happening because of y" when the x and y are completely unrelated in every aspect and are entirely coincidental”

Sociocultural groups draw on shared indexical fields, leading to similar first and second order indexical associations.

STIMULUS	IDENTIFICATIONS of social media platforms & users	CHARACTERIZATIONS of social media platforms & users
<p>S4-0B</p> 	<p>"I might expect it to be on <u>Reddit</u> or a shitty YouTubers page." IN-7 "Some stupid person on <u>Reddit</u>. It has a Reddit vibe to me." IN-1 "This feels like something you'd pull off of 8chan or <u>Reddit</u>." IN-14 "This is probably like a <u>Reddit</u> post someone has put together." IN-8 "I immediately went: <u>Reddit!</u> I don't go on Reddit too much, but like my ideas of Reddit and stuff." IN-15</p>	<p>"This is some right-wing bullshit." IN-7 "It has a faux academicness to it. [...] The person who made it thinks they're cleverer than they are." IN-7 "Like a teenage or early-20s white boy, or someone who aspires to be that demographic. Sad and pathetic, also angry and so unpredictable." IN-14 "I don't expect to agree with this person [on anything] and I don't expect to like them [as a person]." IN-8</p>
<p>S1-0B</p> 	<p>"It's giving young femme 'cottage-core' Tumblrina; that's the vibe." IN-10 "This somebody doing social media. 15-35 year old woman who is like 'I'm going to take care of the trees', but isn't the best at recycling" IN-12 "This is Instagram millennial chic. Very light, girly, "I'm a plant mom" kind of way, not [radical feminist]" IN-14 "This makes me think of like an Instagram influencer, derogatory. It sort of fits the aesthetic--or [my assumptions of] the aesthetic; I don't actually have an Instagram or a TikTok." IN-5 .</p>	<p>"I would say, I don't trust the creator of this visualization. I don't think they're trying to be dishonest, but I don't think they know what they're doing." IN-10 "They are not inherently unreliable, but extremely unprofessional. I'd be like 'I have no idea where you got this data or why you put it like that!'" IN-12 Instantly predisposed to discount whatever this person is saying, not because they're a horrible person, just haven't been to [any] research methods class" (IN5) "Something like this, like Instagram-y, I would immediately be skeptical" IN-14</p>

“I trust this the most [of all the presented visualizations]. I feel like this comes from a newspaper which would have a political bias that probably sits closer to my own personal political bias.” —(IN-13: S7-OB)

“If this were to come across my dash, for, like a [topic] I don’t know anything about, I would automatically distrust that person’s opinion on that [topic] I would be like, I don’t know [what this is about], but you’re probably wrong.”— (IN-4: S14-OB)

Take-away Points



- Form cannot be reduced to a container for content.
- Aspects of online texts may function indexically.
- Online texts are shot through with voices (real and imagined). These voices shape their effects.

Next Steps

- Semiotics of Changing Minds
- Indexicality and AI
- “We Need Some Enrichment in Our Enclosure”:
Fandom, Pseudoarchaeology, and Conspiracy as
Play