

Sharing Truths About the Self: Theorizing News Reposting on Social Media

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Research indicates that social media users pay limited attention to accuracy when reposting news. If users do not primarily repost to transmit accurate information, what other purpose does this activity serve? This article contributes to the theorization of news sharing by exploring seven affordances enabled by social media's reposting features, namely *visibility*, *scalability*, *persistence*, *association*, *meta-voicing*, *interactivity*, and *immediacy*. Taken together, beyond facilitating the spreading of information, these affordances render reposting an effective means for self-presentation similar to Harry Frankfurt's notion of *bullshit*. Like bullshitters, reposters are principally concerned with presenting an image of themselves. However, unlike bullshitters, reposters can be deterred by a post's inaccuracy. Still, because the social media context draws users' attention to interpersonal connections, accuracy is often not top of mind when making reposting choices. Thus, as platforms no longer serve only social objectives but have also become integral news sources, what is being communicated primarily for self-presentation purposes may inadvertently be perceived for its informational value. Ultimately, this *functional context collapse* contributes to the (unintended) spreading of misinformation through individual reposting.

Keywords: bullshit, functional context collapse, news sharing, platform affordances, reposting, self-presentation

Social media has become a key news source to audiences around the world, with 42% of Americans, 68% of South Africans, and 75% of Malaysians, for example, reporting to get their news on platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Newman et al., 2022). The ascendance of these sites as news sources, however, has also brought along a concern for the spreading of misinformation, often referred to by the more politically charged term *fake news*, largely defined in academia as "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent" (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094). Broadening this conceptualization, today's misinformation need not be presented as pseudojournalistic reporting but may also come in various other forms, such as memes, manipulated videos, and altered screenshots.

Notably, misinformation tends to spread faster and wider online than its real counterparts. Contrary to popular belief, Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) found evidence to suggest that the viral spreading of

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misinformation on Twitter is largely due to individual reposting behaviors rather than malicious bot activity or algorithms. While these findings are yet to be replicated with data from other platforms, the fact that platform algorithms typically prioritize content that is most interacted with (i.e., commented on, liked, and reposted) highlights the role of user behavior in the diffusion of information online.

Thus, a myriad of solutions against misinformation—from media literacy training to fact-checking—strive to help individual users make more reliable reposting choices. These interventions assume that citizens aim to spread true stories, yet lack the skills or information to reliably distinguish fact from fiction. However, a growing body of research suggests that this might not accurately reflect what drives reposting behavior.

Pennycook and colleagues (2021), for example, found evidence for an inattention-based account of misinformation spreading, suggesting that people generally wish to avoid disseminating false content and are typically able to tell truth from falsehood—but, in the context of social media, their attention is focused on factors besides accuracy. When deciding which news to repost, users are not primarily concerned with the story's accuracy but with something else altogether.

We routinely engage in many communicative acts—from joking, gossiping, and storytelling to outright lying—where telling the truth is not the main objective. This article aims to contribute to the theorization of social media reposting as a form of goal-oriented communication. If users' *main* objective behind reposting news is not to transmit accurate information to their network, what other purpose does this activity primarily serve?

To answer this question, this article explores seven key affordances enabled by Facebook and Twitter's news sharing functions, namely *visibility*, *scalability*, *persistence*, *association*, *meta-voicing*, *interactivity*, and *immediacy*. Taken together, I argue that, beyond facilitating the forwarding of information, these affordances also render reposting an effective means for self-presentation. As such, I draw on Harry Frankfurt's (2005) notion of *bullshitting*—another communicative act where truth-telling is not the primary goal—as a lens to further interpret the meaning behind and consequences of online news reposting. Frankfurt (2005) essentially defines *bullshitting* as insincere talk that is marked by an "indifference to how things really are" (p. 34). The bullshitter, Frankfurt (2005) maintains, only cares about "what people think of *him*" (p. 18; emphasis in original).

Although there are similarities between bullshitters and reposters, there are also crucial differences. Like bullshitters, reposters are principally concerned with presenting a particular image of themselves. Some reposters may want to solidify their role as opinion leaders (Hu et al., 2012). Others simply repost news to be part of a crowd (Berriche & Altay, 2020). Still, this is not to say that reposters are entirely unconcerned with reality. Here, I argue that a post's inaccuracy certainly is a deterrent for reposting. However, on social media, users' attention appears to be primarily drawn to interpersonal connections and self-presentation, such that, when it comes to the reposting of information, factual accuracy is not necessarily ignored (deliberately dismissed) but rather neglected (unintentionally left unnoticed).

This presents an issue to the value of truth in the digital sphere: As online networking sites no longer serve only social objectives but have also become integral news sources, what is being communicated primarily for self-presentation purposes may inadvertently be perceived for its informational value. Here, I consider the platforms' multifunctionality to be another form of context collapse, analogous to the flattening of multiple audiences into one (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Originally, context collapse addresses how the merging of different social circles complicates social media users' authentic self-expression. As an extension, I propose a conceptualization of context collapse as the conflation of different social media functions, which instead blurs the boundary between informative speech and communication that serves to satisfy interpersonal needs. Ultimately, I argue that this *functional context collapse* contributes to the (unintended) spreading of misinformation through individual reposting.

Reposting, Retweeting, Sharing

I will focus on Facebook and Twitter in particular, as these platforms are consistently shown to attract the most news-focused users: 47% of Facebook's and 55% of Twitter's user base regularly consume news on each of these platforms (Walker & Matsa, 2021). Still, the maintenance of close relationships remains the primary driver for social media adoption (Global World Index [GWI], 2021). In addition to belongingness being a motivation for social media use, research also typically finds that people seek out these platforms for self-presentation purposes (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). As spaces where one can be seen, heard, and looked up, social media offers users various tools to control how others perceive them. Self-presentation here involves regulating the information one discloses about one's attitudes, abilities, and characteristics. Crucially, this form of perception management can occur both consciously and unconsciously and is considered a key element of human social interactions (Goffman, 1959).

Across most platforms, interactions between users take the form of liking, commenting, or reposting—although companies apply different terms to refer to these behaviors. For example, what has become known as *retweeting* on Twitter is referred to as *sharing* on Facebook and equivalent to what Instagram users mean by *reposting*. In all cases, it entails forwarding another user's post to one's network, which is the digital activity at the center of this article. Although these terms can largely be used interchangeably, most users and scholars in the field typically refer to this forwarding act as *sharing*.

Nevertheless, in this article, I mostly aim to steer clear of the term. In tracing how *sharing* entered the digital realm and how its meaning has evolved, Nicholas John (2017) points out that the word has come to mean virtually any form of social media participation. Thus, when Facebook (2021) encourages its users to "share and express what matters to them" (para. 1), the meaning of *sharing* extends beyond the forwarding of content to one's network and also encompasses activities such as status updates and photo uploads. Borrowing from therapeutic discourse, sharing can simply mean to open up and, in doing so, "cross the boundary between the private and the public" (John, 2017, p. 54). A focus on interpersonal relations is at the center of all social media platforms (boyd & Ellison, 2007) and so to share in this sphere can mean anything that serves to strengthen those ties.

Thus, given the term's breadth and ambiguity, I instead will mostly refer to the act of forwarding content on social media as *reposting*. This expression is decidedly more specific: The prefix *re-* suggests

that the object being forwarded had existed previously and that it is now published to the digital space once more. As such, Twitter's retweet function is marked by an icon resembling the universal recycling symbol. The general association here is that whatever is being reposted remains in the online world and is given another life cycle, which is precisely what ought *not* to happen to misinformation. Notably, while it is possible to share a post privately with individual users only, reposting generally entails the more public spreading of content to one's entire network.

Reposting is particularly popular when it comes to newsworthy information. On Twitter, roughly 50% of all tweets are retweets (Leetaru, 2019b), but following breaking news events, this percentage rises significantly. For example, in the hours after the Green New Deal press conference, the proportion of related tweets that were reposted rose to 82% (Leetaru, 2019a). As a consequence, users often no longer actively seek out news but expect that important information will reach them through their peers. This so-called *news-finds-me perception*—which is particularly prevalent among adults who are younger, female, nonwhite, and who report lower incomes (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2018)—emphasizes the remarkably large role that reposting plays in the consumption of news online, especially among specific cohorts of users.

Functional Context Collapse

Although it is difficult to imagine Facebook and Twitter without their reposting buttons today, this functionality was markedly absent when these platforms were established. Facebook first rolled out a Share button in October 2006 that they then described as a “link that sits next to all content” that users could click to “post it up on [their] profile” (Hughes, 2006, para. 3). At the time, its signifier was the word “Share” spelled out next to a plus symbol (see Figure 1), presumably alluding to the ability to add content to one's “wall.”



Figure 1. Facebook wall showing Share button next to posted video (Hughes, 2006).

Facebook's introduction of the Share button was subsidiary to the simultaneous roll-out of its News Feed, arguably the platform's most pivotal innovation. Until then, users had to visit other users' profiles to view any new posts. The News Feed became an alternative home page where the activities of users' entire friend lists were aggregated in a (then) chronological stream. With this update, Facebook was no longer just

about “look[ing] up people” (Facebook, 2005). Instead, it also introduced the possibility to “share information with people you know” (Facebook, 2007).

In comparison, Twitter’s process of developing the retweet function was distinctly more user-driven. Unlike other blogging services, Twitter did not offer ways to format posts, which made it difficult for users to attribute the source of a message. By 2007, early Twitter adopters had already come up with several competing solutions to the problem, including expressions such as *via*, *h/t* (for hat tip), *thx @*, and *retweet*, often shortened to *RT* followed by an original tweet that they copied and pasted (boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010). However, being limited to 140 characters, users at times indicated a post was not an original thought using *RT* without offering the source. On other occasions, users gave full credit but shortened or otherwise modified the original tweet to stay within the character limit (Burgess & Baym, 2020). Both compromised the integrity of the original tweet.

Recognizing *RT* as the most popular convention, in August 2009, Twitter announced the roll-out of a retweet feature, which would allow users to quote and forward other users’ posts by simply clicking a button. Acknowledging the role that their users played in this update, Twitter cofounder Biz Stone (2009) described the *RT* convention as a “great example of Twitter teaching us what it wants to be” (para. 2). By October 2010, retweeting had become fully formalized for all users globally. With that, Twitter was no longer just “a service for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate” (Twitter, 2009) but also became a “rich source of instant information” (Twitter, 2010).

Ultimately, with the introduction of their respective reposting functions, both Twitter and Facebook broadened their functional contexts to include not only interpersonal exchanges but also more informative communicative processes. This presents a new form of context collapse: Scholars have extensively studied the merging of various social contexts into one online audience (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Originally, context collapse addresses how the merging of different social circles on social media complicates users’ authentic self-expression. Here, I am proposing a conceptualization of context collapse as the conflation of different functions seen on social media, which instead blurs the boundary between informative speech and communication that serves to satisfy interpersonal needs.

Crucially, these varying functions are difficult to disentangle as platforms do not provide separate spaces for different types of communicative acts. As such, users are confronted with the task of balancing and negotiating between the (at times) conflicting demands of providing details about themselves and spreading important information about the world. Thus, when reposting a news story, users cannot be concerned only with how relevant and informative this particular story is to their network, but they must also consider how reposting it reflects on themselves. That is, although these reposting features were implemented to offer opportunities to spread and consume newsy content, they also remain situated in a context where communication is fundamentally organized around self-presentation and impression management.

Affordances

To study the relationship between emerging technologies and their users, scholars frequently adopt an affordance approach centered around the perception of an object's utility (Gibson, 1977). By exploring what Facebook and Twitter's reposting features afford people the opportunity to do, we may take a first step toward understanding the communicative outcomes that these functions elicit.

Visibility

First, the reposting feature allows users to make their knowledge of a particular piece of content visible to others. In affordance theory, visibility also refers to the level of effort required to find information (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). When users repost a story, the content does not only appear in the feeds of the user's connections; it is also preserved on their profile page, thus tying it to concerns for self-presentation.

Scalability

As is central to most social media features, reposting makes it possible for private individuals to reach *large* audiences. Depending on users' privacy settings, a repost may be accessible to the entire public or a specified group of connections. Notably, while platforms provide the possibility of reaching sizable audiences, it is not guaranteed (boyd, 2010). A consequence of this scalability is the collapse of contexts (boyd, 2007): The social media architecture makes it difficult to uphold separate social contexts and thus to maintain a comprehensive view of one's entire network. Given that connections from various contexts are collapsed into one space on these platforms, reposters may assess the lowest common denominator of what is normatively appropriate content to be shared with their entire audience (Hogan, 2010). In other cases, users might also simply imagine and address a partial audience to cope with their inability to know and consider everyone who will ultimately consume their reposted content (boyd, 2010).

Persistence

Moreover, reposts are automatically archived on people's profiles and do not disappear unless users actively choose to delete them. This affordance typically is referred to as persistence (boyd, 2010) but may also be known as recordability (Hancock, Toma, & Ellison, 2007) or permanence (Whittaker, 2003). While unmediated communication typically is ephemeral, social media speech tends to be persistent and thus "on the record" (boyd, 2014, p. 11). Hence, a repost can be received and have implications long after it was first published. While this allows for asynchronous communication and thus the reach of broader audiences, there are also risks associated with the possibility of consuming content outside of its original context. As such, over the past years, a myriad of public figures have had to justify resurfaced social media posts that perhaps were tolerated in the past but are no longer deemed acceptable today (e.g., Rosenblatt, 2021).

Association

Further, reposting affords users a way to make associations (i.e., "established connections between individuals"; Treem & Leonardi, 2012, p. 162), more explicit. Reposting is distinct from original

posting in that it invariably establishes a link between reposters and the source of the original post. The nature of this link can vary and be left to the audience's interpretation. Still, when a repost is published without further elaboration, it can typically be presumed that the reposer agrees with the original creator. The fact that some Twitter users disclaim that "retweets are not endorsements" suggests that the default assumption is the opposite (Molyneux, 2014, p. 923). Moreover, particularly on Twitter, the term *ratio* refers to the number of replies relative to likes and retweets that a post garners. A high ratio (i.e., when replies vastly outnumber likes and retweets) is considered an indicator of highly objectionable content. This then suggests that retweets are put in the same category as likes, which unambiguously are signals of approval. Unless otherwise made explicit, a retweet generally is considered an endorsement or, at least, a form of amplification. By reposting, users can signal that they follow or are connected to the original poster. In this way, reposting can serve the performance of a (desirable) social connection before an audience (boyd, 2010).

Meta-Voicing

Further, meta-voicing refers to the ability to "react online to others' presence, profiles, content and activities" (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013, p. 41). Even when users choose to repost without attaching a remark, by publicly forwarding a news story, users are still providing some form of commentary. A virtually endless stream of posts exists in the social media universe; a user's decision to repost a particular one thus carries meaning. Like associations, if not made clear otherwise, it can be assumed that the reposer's attitude toward the original post is positive. Still, the relative allusiveness of any commentary grants reposters a level of plausible deniability if need be.

Interactivity

Moreover, when users repost, their audience is invited to offer reactions, for example, through likes and comments. This anticipation of measurable feedback—displayed as metrics alongside a repost—certainly influences users' reposting choices. Here, I will refer to this affordance as interactivity (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). Importantly, the extent to which a user's network—and, indeed, the entire public—can interact with their repost may vary both across and within platforms and may thus differentially affect their consideration and anticipation of such potential reactions. On Twitter, users can expect responses only to their retweets if they opt to "quote tweet," (i.e., retweet with a personal annotation). By contrast, whenever Twitter users retweet without adding a remark, any responses such as comments will be attributed to the original source and not the reposting user. On Facebook, users can anticipate responses to all forms of reposting—with or without annotation—directly attached to their repost and thus profile.

Immediacy

Finally, editability refers to the possibility of spending time drafting a post before it is published and viewed by others, which certainly helps users cope with the permanence of their posts. However, the affordance that is arguably more central to reposting is immediacy. Both on Twitter and Facebook, users are given the option to add a comment to their reposts, which provides opportunities to clarify their stance on the original post. Still, more commonly, users will forward content without further elaboration. To do so,

users are merely required to click two buttons (Twitter has introduced additional points of friction that will be discussed later). Thus, the reposting feature gives users the ability to communicate even complex ideas with virtually no effort and time investment. This is not to say, however, that all reposting lacks deliberation. Rather, deliberation is not a requirement for reposting.

Especially given the fast pace of social media trends, immediacy is key to reposters' ability to showcase that they are in the loop or even ahead of their time. As such, self-perceived opinion leadership has been identified as a common characteristic of reposters (Ma, Lee, & Goh, 2014). Indeed, the reposting dynamics seen on these platforms are reminiscent of Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) idea of the *two-step flow* of communication, wherein opinion leaders exert influence on their community by mediating information (Wu, Hofman, Mason, & Matts, 2011)—although the digital landscape is arguably less hierarchical than the flow Katz and Lazarsfeld described more than 60 years ago. Being an opinion leader, both then and now, requires speedy means of communication.

The Bullshitter and the Reposter

Taken together, beyond simply forwarding information, reposting allows users to display (*visibility*) their social ties (*association*) and attitudes (*meta-voicing*), which large audiences (*scalability*) can view and react to (*interactivity*) both instantaneously (*immediacy*) as well as asynchronously (*persistence*). One element consistently emerges in each of the affordances central to social media reposting: the opportunity for effective self-presentation. In this way, it is similar to the communicative act of bullshitting, which I will adduce as a lens to further interpret the motivations behind and consequences of reposting.

In his theoretical examination of bullshit, Harry Frankfurt (2005) maintains that despite its increasing presence in modern societies, the notion of bullshit has only sparsely been explored. This, too, applies to reposting. Frankfurt's analysis can be organized along four dimensions that highlight the differences between bullshitting and the more established concept of lying, namely their relationship to truth, meaningfulness, constraints, and accountability. Ultimately, Frankfurt argues that the ease with which bullshitters can violate discursive rules through their focus on self-presentation and indifference to factual accuracy presents a substantial threat to the human apprehension of objective reality. Thus, Frankfurt's bullshit-lie taxonomy presents an eminent framework to determine the extent to which the reposter might also imperil the value of truth in the digital space.

Truth

Truths About the World

Frankfurt argues that although bullshitting and lying differ on various dimensions, the most defining characteristic and difference between bullshitters and liars is the former's lacking interest in reality. Critically, this ignorance need not render their statements false, per se. Whether bullshitters believe they know the truth is not relevant, either. Their objective is neither to reveal nor to conceal it. The bullshitter is not primarily concerned with reflecting reality but instead with self-presentation.

By contrast, it is conceptually impossible to tell a lie unless one believes one knows the truth. Thinking they know the truth, liars attempt to insert a “particular falsehood” (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 51) in place of it. In this regard, liars remain respectful of the truth in that they acknowledge it exists, believe they know it, and try to hide it. Therefore, liars endeavor to lead their audience away from an accurate perception of reality, whereas bullshitters are indifferent to the state of affairs. The bullshitter primarily attempts to “convey a certain impression of *himself*” (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 18), which moreover does not necessarily reflect what the bullshitter truly believes. The liar at least cares enough to determine the truth, while the bullshitter has no such ambition.

Psychological research into news sharing suggests that reposters may not be primarily concerned with the veracity of the content they spread, either. For example, when Pennycook and his colleagues (2021) asked users what they value in the content they repost online, subjects overwhelmingly reported that factual accuracy was important to them, even more so than political alignment, surprise, humor, and interest. Yet, when provided with a set of news stories, what survey respondents judged as true did not match up with what they deemed to be worthy of being reposted. Thus, there is reason to believe that there is another primary motivation that was not listed in Pennycook and colleagues’ (2021) initial survey that drives reposting behavior.

A review of more than 100 studies examining news sharing on social media—with methodologies ranging from content analyses and interviews to surveys—found that people repost for various reasons (Kümpel, Karnowski, & Keyling, 2015). Some studies indicate that, indeed, users repost simply to share information that might be useful to others. According to this line of research (Rudat, Buder, & Hesse, 2014), reposters certainly are concerned with the truth-value of the content they spread and further see themselves as “altruistic democratizers” with a civic duty to participate in the online news flow.

On the other end of the spectrum, however, many studies indicate that people repost news to distinguish themselves from their peers and thus define themselves as trendsetters (Ma, Lee, & Goh, 2011). On other occasions, reposters—knowing that others have likely already come across these posts—may also forward content to be part of the crowd (Berriche & Altay, 2020). As such, this line of research instead paints the picture of a reposer who is not principally concerned with a story’s informational value and veracity but instead with seeking status by spreading it (Lee & Ma, 2012). Importantly, these studies do not suggest that reposters necessarily sacrifice the truth-value of the news they repost just to meet their impression management needs—indeed, self-presentation and informativeness are not mutually exclusive—but rather that they prioritize and are more focused on how reposting reflects on them than on how informative and factually accurate the story is.

These varying objectives, from selfless news distribution to status-seeking, can be difficult to reconcile, and it is certainly possible (and likely) that motivations simply vary across and within users. Indeed, whether users repost to appear smart, to entertain, or to be informative to others—either way, in and by reposting in the social media context, where their messages are archived and visible to broad audiences, users necessarily engage in and are concerned with self-presentation as well.

Moreover, particularly arousing content is reposted more frequently than less arousing information (Berger & Milkman, 2012). This is especially noteworthy given that misinformation often contains affective language intended to emotionally antagonize readers (Bakir & McStay, 2018) and further frequently inspires responses of fear, disgust, or surprise (Vosoughi et al., 2018). In a similar vein, an analysis of more than 500,000 political social media posts showed that with each moral-emotional word (e.g., *shame*, *punish*, *evil*), a post's likelihood of being shared increases by 20% within politically homogenous social media circles (Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, & van Bavel, 2017). This distinctly emphasizes the role of social media as a space for moral discourse. Research even finds that emotional responses to headlines can overwrite existing source credibility judgments (Baum & Abdel Rahman, 2021). Based on this, there is reason to suggest that, at times, reposters may be so occupied by their emotional response and feelings of moral duty in reaction to a particular post that they fail to sufficiently scrutinize the veracity of the content when they repost it. Indeed, recent research shows that, to improve the quality of their reposts, users do not need to think harder or longer but rather think differently and with more attention to a post's veracity (Lin, Pennycook, & Rand, 2022).

Responding to these concerns, Twitter introduced an element of friction to their reposting function in June 2020. Whenever users initiate a retweet before having clicked on the story in question, a message will show up asking them to engage with the content first. Users have the option to disregard this prompt; however, the introduction of friction alone acts as a reminder to consider the content's accuracy. Indeed, in some cases, reading the prompt (and the article) deterred users from reposting altogether (Twitter, 2020). In May 2021, Facebook announced it would test a similar prompt, but findings and plans to fully implement these "informative friction" (Gillis, 2020) screens on their platform have yet to be disclosed.

Frankfurt further clarifies that bullshit claims may even be so very far-fetched and grotesque, and yet it would make no difference to the bullshitter if they actually were true. This severe indifference to reality does not apply to reposters. Rather, ensuring the veracity of their reposts may not be a top priority to reposters, who are, above all, determined to give a particular impression of themselves. While it may be qualities other than accuracy that drive users' decisions to repost, when they are in a position to thoroughly judge the accuracy of a story, finding that it is false certainly will discourage them from reposting. As such, users report being concerned about spreading misinformation as it might hurt their reputation (Altay, Hacquin, & Mercier, 2020).

Truths About the Self

In defining bullshit, Frankfurt (2005) also draws comparisons to the notion of *bull sessions*. He finds that these informal conversations offer a space for participants to discuss "emotion-laden aspects of life" (p. 36) without the seriousness that such exchanges typically entail. In this respect, bull sessions (and by association, bullshitting) bear a resemblance to modern therapy sessions where patients are encouraged to share (i.e., to reveal their most authentic inner thoughts by expressing themselves emotionally rather than intellectually; John, 2017). In this context, to share means to tell something of personal import without any fear of judgment. Crucially, what is being shared is typically not up for discussion: Sharers are not necessarily expected to tell *the* truth but rather to speak *their* truth. In bull sessions, however, individuals

can test out and express different attitudes without being held to them. As such, bullshitting does not necessarily involve the *authentic* self-disclosure that is inherent to sharing.

By using this sharing terminology to refer to reposting, platforms elicit associations to therapy talk in their users. If sharing with one's therapist or friends typically means to express one's "personal truth in a way that cannot be argued with" (John, 2017, p. 115), then sharing with one's online audience should not be any different. Whether or not intentional, by choosing to refer to the forwarding of content as *sharing*, platforms do remarkable discursive work by invoking the term's unambiguously positive connotations. Then, the fact that sharing is perceived as inherently good leaves little room to scrutinize or contest whatever is being shared.

Ultimately, there are two main differences between the bullshitter and the reposter that concern telling the truth about the world and telling the truth about the self. Bullshitters neither care about the accuracy of the content that they spread nor about their authentic support for it. Bullshitters simply want to persuade an audience of a particular version of themselves. By contrast, reposters, distracted by the social media context, may neglect to thoroughly investigate a post's accuracy, but they are nonetheless concerned with the authenticity of their support for it. While some users might be more authentic than others in their online self-expression (Bailey, Matz, Youyou, & Iyengar, 2020), even when users give impressions that are more idealized and different from their offline character, the contents they choose to share online nonetheless typically reflect an image they truthfully aspire to attain (Harris & Bardey, 2019).

Meaningfulness

Further, Frankfurt (2005) concludes that because bullshitters are not concerned with describing reality, their claims are "empty talk" (p. 45). Presupposing that communication serves only the objective of transferring information, he asserts that the bullshitter defeats this purpose. However, Frankfurt therein fails to consider that communication might also answer a more ritualistic purpose of representing and maintaining shared beliefs among a community (Carey, 2008). Bullshit, then, is meaningful in that it intentionally conveys an impression of the bullshitter—even if it is not a truthful reflection of their beliefs. The bullshitter's claims meaningfully serve to represent (seemingly) shared beliefs. In a similar vein, reposters' priority might not be to describe the world around them through forwarding information they have encountered. The significance of their action lies in the ritualistic way they aim to reaffirm their values to their audience (boyd, 2010).

Further, Frankfurt omits the possibility that an audience might expect that a speaker's principal aim, rather than to describe the world around them, could be to present *themselves* instead. On social media, for instance, the audience is well aware that self-presentation can take priority. Users frequently assume both the roles of audience and authors, allowing them as readers to anticipate reposters' intentions for self-curation from their own experience in that role (Hogan, 2010).

Indeed, these dynamics are not new. Examining the use and popularity of social media platforms, Miller (2008) situates the user at the center of the digital sphere, arguing that what is being consumed online is other people and their connections. He further maintains that this has led digital communication to

shift away from the exchange of substantive information toward what he terms *phatic communication*. Miller (2015) further refers to Heidegger's (1962) notion of *idle talk*, which—much like phatic communication taking place online—prioritizes the *process* of passing along information over the *content* of that information. That is, the point of reposting a story online, Miller (2015) argues, is less to forward talk to others and more to signify that one is “with the talk” (p. 262). Just this display of alliance with what is being said—which heavily relies on the repost function's affordances of association and meta-voicing—already carries meaning.

In this way, reposting can be considered a form of storytelling (Polletta & Callahan, 2017). To share a story is to perform one's values to others by implying a particular stance toward the events recounted. Users may repost news articles to inform others or repost a humorous video to entertain their friends. Either way, in doing so, they inevitably also make a statement about themselves. Although many stories and online posts are educational or entertaining, decisions to share any one of them with an audience are primarily driven by how this action might reflect on the tellers and reposters themselves (Jensen-Schau & Gilly, 2003).

Both storytelling and reposting are important for the maintenance of community. Beyond the plot that is outlined, people make a statement about themselves by telling a story. Thus, the truth-value of a narrative often lies in its meaning rather than its accuracy (Gabriel, 2004). A narrative contract exists, such that storytellers buy the audience's temporary suspension of criticism and scrutiny in exchange for delivering a story that is both “meaningful and verisimilar” (Gabriel, 2008, p. 159). Reposting follows many of these same dynamics.

Constraints

Moreover, Frankfurt juxtaposes bullshitting with lying with regard to the constraints put on these activities. He contends that the bullshitter engages in the practice of factually describing a state of affairs, yet does not subscribe to the conditions that such endeavor demands. Frankfurt further argues that as bullshit requires no awareness of the truth, it leaves the bullshitter with virtually boundless freedom to creatively fabricate claims. Lies, in contrast, require sharp focus and objectivity. Frankfurt (2005), hence, describes bullshit as playful “art” and lying as a careful “craft” (p. 53). He condemns bullshitters for mindlessly emitting claims only with attention to what suits them to say—an indulgence that liars are denied.

While reposters are not required to limit their statements under the guidance of truth either, in some ways, they are not entirely as free as bullshitters are. Reposting content on social media is neither an art nor a craft. The utilization of these instantaneous and almost frictionless reposting tools demands no skill and solely necessitates the existence of a post to be forwarded and published once more. Nevertheless, reposting is different from bullshitting in that social media offers a discursive space where communicators can choose which parts of the self they wish to share and authentically perform to their audience. The way Frankfurt describes bullshitters, they appear to address topics that they are obliged to speak on, either because it comes up in dialogue or because they are expected to (e.g., politicians speaking on their religious faith). That is, to participate in a conversation or respond to a question someone asked, bullshitters might make statements that they neither know to be accurate nor inaccurate so as to give a certain impression of themselves, which need not reflect their actual opinion. In fact, bullshitters might not even have an opinion.

In other words, one element of bullshitting seems to be some sort of expectation for someone to speak about something at a particular moment.

In most cases, this does not apply to reposting. Here, users are curators of the topics they want to address, which allows them to share those parts of themselves that they wish to authentically disclose. That is, by relying on “crucial omissions,” reposters can remain truthful in that they are able to “profit from lies without, technically, telling any” (Goffman, 1959, p. 62). The reason why reposters—unlike bullshitters—can convey some truths about themselves is that they are given the freedom to carefully pick which parts to share and which to keep private.

Importantly, this freedom is not always given online. At times, there are expectations for users to speak about issues that they would rather avoid. For one, public figures who typically are active on social media may occasionally be expected to use this medium to address a particular issue that concerns them. For example, following author J. K. Rowling’s controversial statements on transgender issues, the public awaited and observed how members of the Harry Potter movie cast took to social media in response (Pocock, 2020). Further, expectations for ordinary users to share their views may also arise with very pressing issues that are so salient that everyone is expected to make a statement. The protests against police brutality in the United States (and beyond) during the summer of 2020 present one such example where not only public figures but also private people were expected to take a stance (Capatides, 2020). At the height of these protests, there was an explicit online demand for people to share their views on issues of race, which many have done through reposting content by other, more prominent people. This expectation to express themselves online may have led some users who either had no strong views on the issue or wished to keep their opinions private to nonetheless make statements that perhaps did not truly reflect their state of mind. In such rare cases, bullshitting and reposting might overlap.

Accountability

Finally, Frankfurt points to the commonly different moral treatments of liars and bullshitters. The discovery that one has been lied to usually results in feelings of personal affront and violation of trust. By contrast, if caught, bullshitters generally are faced with more lenient consequences. Not only does their indifference to reality present a challenge in catching their offense, but their intentions are also difficult to discern as bullshitters are neither actively concealing details about the world nor about themselves. Thus, Frankfurt reasons, considering that bullshitting also requires less effort than lying, people’s preference for bullshitting becomes eminently clear. In light of the bullshitter’s indifference to reality, Frankfurt’s (2005) analysis culminates in his assertion that, therefore, the bullshitter constitutes “the greater enemy to truth” (p. 60) than the liar.

Reposting false news, by way of contrast, can have substantial social costs. Even though there is an expectation for self-presentation in digital discourse, some users report being reluctant to repost even politically aligned content out of fear it might be false, which could hurt their reputations (Altay et al., 2020). Indeed, as does apply with all issues of trust, the reputational costs of spreading falsehoods are higher than the gains of spreading true information (Yaniv & Kleinberger, 2000). Here, the reposting function’s immediacy affordance, which allows users to instantaneously react with little deliberation, stands in

opposition to its persistence and visibility affordances, which hold users accountable for any statement made—regardless of the level of reflection involved.

These dynamics are further complicated by the relative allusiveness of the meaning behind reposts, which gives users the ability to deny certain accusations. For example, users may claim that they did not agree with or thought that a certain statement was true, but that they merely intended to draw attention to it by reposting (e.g., Egan, 2019). What is more, people are also more likely to retweet content that already has been retweeted by others in their network (Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, & Adamic, 2012). As such, users' collective participation in amplifying content via reposts further reduces accountability.

Conclusion

Overall, by examining the reposter in light of Frankfurt's conceptualization of bullshitting, we may gain insights into the habits of truth-telling in today's digital spaces. It would be an overstatement to conclude, because reposters do not make claims *primarily* to reflect the reality surrounding them, that they have no respect for the truth. Reposters might not pay much attention to the veracity of their statements, but they certainly are not indifferent to it. Further, their statements also carry meaning as reposters, unlike bullshitters, aim to authentically present an image of themselves by reposting. While it is difficult to catch anyone for making bullshit claims, because of the persistence and scaled visibility of their statements, reposters may be held accountable should the content they spread turn out to be false. Still, because the normative points made in reposts can remain allusive, there is room for reposters to evade some responsibility.

All communicative acts, online and offline, arguably offer some information about the speaker. However, this self-presentation aspect is particularly amplified in the social media context where communication is visible, scaled, interactive, and persistent. Thus, although reposting is defined as the forwarding of information, this communicative act still primarily serves to give a certain impression of the speaker—simply because it is situated on social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Moreover, the focus on interpersonal relations that lies at the heart of social media contexts can lead reposters to spread and associate themselves with sometimes complex ideas without much attention to their factual accuracy. Then, reposting is not primarily about sharing truths about the world but about sharing truths about the self.

Notably, although the veracity of the contents they repost is not their principal concern, it may still affect their audience's perception of reality. Audiences consuming reposts online may even understand that the content may not have been verified and that reposters, first and foremost, aim to convey a picture of themselves. Yet, long-term, repeated exposure to false claims promotes fluent processing, which subconsciously leads individuals to interpret the information as true (Fazio, Brashier, Payne, & Marsh, 2015). That is to say, even when audiences do not actively assume reposts to be factually accurate, upon multiple encounters, they may inadvertently come to believe in their veracity (see *illusory truth effect*; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2017). This is further enhanced when information is specifically received from trusted friends. Thus, although reposting is short of bullshitting in that the former behavior still serves to give a truthful impression

of the reposter, it can still lead our grasp for objective truth to become “attenuated or lost” (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 60).

Hence, even though reposters’ intentions may be more sincere and transparent than those of bullshitters, their claims still have the potential to imperil the value of truth in the digital sphere. Social media primarily remains a space to maintain and build interpersonal relationships, where self-presentation is encouraged and appreciated. However, with the introduction of their repost functions, Facebook and Twitter have also become key sources for news consumption, where individuals seek out important information. As social media takes on various sometimes conflicting functions—offering users a space to simultaneously socialize, self-curate, gather information, and consume news—it can become difficult to distinguish phatic from informative communication. Introducing points of friction to nudge users toward inspecting the accuracy of the news stories they wish to spread could prove useful in improving the information environment on these platforms. After all, most reposters do care about the truth. Sometimes they just need a reminder to recognize it.

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