

Audience Design, code choice, identity and Facebook: Computer-mediated communication during the Tunisian revolution

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This paper examines language use on the Internet, specifically the way users signal the intended recipient of a posted message on Facebook's "wall", a semi-public forum connected to a user's profile. The data analyzed are posts on the wall of one young Tunisian during the final week of protests, January 10-16, 2011, leading to the departure of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and shortly after. Due to personal relationships with individuals from diverse backgrounds, the user's wall became a site of intense discussion within and between three groups with varied needs and goals: those experiencing the revolution in-country, those keeping up with events via various media, and those interested in the events due only to their friendship with the primary user. These groups are paralleled to a certain extent by the use of three main codes in the posts: Tunisian Arabic, French and English.

Recent research by Boyd (2008) shows that young Internet users tend to have the same social network for both online and face-to-face interactions, making their online identities extensions of those offline. When multiple friend groups are included in the same virtual space, such as on Facebook, a user must find innovative ways to distinguish the intended recipient group of each message while being aware of the others' access to the same information.

Modifying Bell's Audience design, I analyzed the 408 posts made by users on the single Facebook wall examined, or an average of 59 per day over the 7 days. These posts were made by the wall owner and 103 of her 'friends' on Facebook including Tunisians, Americans, and friends from other Arab countries. The data was collected shortly after it was posted, representing authentic language use by all participants, and was chosen due to the number of groups involved and codes used by the authors. I analyzed the language of each post, its topic, location and prior knowledge implied by given references, the identities of those who responded, and the type of response they gave, ranging from agreement to apparent surprise at the situation as a whole. While the primary user notes using different codes to communicate with certain audiences, the data clearly shows that the intended audience is defined more often through implied location and prior knowledge than language of a given post.

By adapting Bell's Audience Design framework to CMC, I show how users navigate the presence of multiple groups in a single online space, particularly when the groups have contradictory needs and wants. Each of Bell's four audience types exist in written online communication similarly to spoken communication; Addressee, Auditor, Overhearer and Eavesdropper are all present, though the extent to which they appear varies somewhat from spoken data with Addressees and Eavesdroppers relatively rare due in part to the nature of the medium and the 'friend' status of all participating individuals. By identifying the members of each audience type visible in the data, it is also possible to observe the identities expressed to each of these groups.