

# Exploring the Effects of Social Media Discourse on Public Policy

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**Abstract:** The advent of social media has provided non-authoritative users a space to spread ideas and information to vast audiences. Given this paradigm shift, public policy makers and public administrators can benefit from a deeper discussion on the effects of social media platforms and how meaning is contextualized and recontextualized at a rate that can potentially confound public messaging. This paper provides an analysis of social media discourse at the intersection of news dissemination and individual interpretation. Using the concept of grafting which allows language users to make language compatible to suit their goals, the study in this paper examines how language intended to characterize concepts and people in a negative light can be recontextualized to take on more positive meanings. The implications for this phenomenon on public policy and messaging will also be discussed to provide a starting point for the development of real-world applications for authoritative sources of information to address social media discourse.

**Keywords:** Social media, Grafting, Discourse analysis, Public messaging, Public administration

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## 1. Introduction

Traditional discussions of mass mediation (Spitulnik 1996, 1993) rely on assumptions of an authoritative source from which language and meaning are communicated to entire cultures and communities. This largely unidirectional transfer of knowledge has carried implications about the enduring power of authoritative knowledge, which now faces challenges from the rise of social media and the resulting decentralization of authority. As the power of centralized authority diminishes through new technologies and social media platforms aimed at incorporating more voices in public policy discourse, a deeper understanding of the role of social media in issue messaging requires further study.

This paper examines the linguistic phenomenon of grafting (Gal, 2018) through a discourse analysis of social media. The notion that users of language have the power to recontextualize meaning to achieve ends that are different from what is originally intended has long been documented in the scholarly research but is especially true in social media contexts, confounding public policy discourse to an extent that deserves further discussion. To that end, this paper observes occurrences where new meanings and expressions of power and identity

are grafted onto language in social media. An analysis of the evolution of meaning and messages on social media reveals several important examples where language that was originally coded to have negative connotations have been recontextualized to assume more positive orientations. This paper seeks to emphasize his dynamic attribute inherent in social media discourse as a characteristic that those involved in public policy should seek to address in public messaging.

## 2. Background

Public policy messaging as conceptualized by the authors of this paper refers to efforts by public officials to frame a particular issue to a mass audience for the purposes of collective action or, at minimum, common cause. Druckman (2001) describes the relationship between how issues are framed and the extent to which the public responds accordingly. Within this context, those responsible for carrying out public policy are in constant interaction with the public audiences for which they are responsible as well as mass media entities that, in societies that grant journalistic freedom, frame issues independent of official control. This interaction involves multiple actors and carries the assumption that public officials do not (and in open societies, should not) have total

control over their audiences, particularly as mass media plays a consequential role in interpreting public policy to the public (Bonilla & Mo, 2019).

In more recent times, social media has also played a growing influence that informs and confounds public messaging. A discourse analysis of the relationship between public messaging and social media is especially useful in a "post-truth" era dominated by misinformation and disinformation. Social media has been observed to not only facilitate the proliferation of such knowledge not only by authoritarian entities but also by sympathetic social media users and eventually unwitting propagators who may unintentionally lend their validation of knowledge that runs counter to public education of critical issues. Messaging around the COVID-19 pandemic provides one pointed example of this phenomenon, where social media has contributed to the spread of disinformation regarding mitigation measures and vaccination campaigns around the world (Lang *et al.*, 2021). The resulting skepticism about the effectiveness of measures recommended by public health experts has been shown in the research to contribute to a significant number of infections and deaths from the coronavirus to date, prompting scholars to characterize misinformation as a public health crisis (Merchant, South & Lurie, 2021). The recent history of social media with respect to this and other issues where public messaging is essential thus justifies a discussion on the discursive practices that contribute to misinformation and disinformation among users of social media.

### 3. Theoretical Context

A basic understanding of mass mediation, at least with respect to language (Spitulnik, 1996), suggests that mass media platforms (e.g. television, radio, print publications) have long held an outsized influence on knowledge at play in daily life within a community. Put simply, mass media provides a platform to easily disseminate knowledge to a large audience within a community. In turn, the resulting shared knowledge can be amplified by each member within that audience, thus normalizing that knowledge to the extent where it is unquestioned and definitive of a culture (Lessig, 2002).

This construction of cultural knowledge, however, is complicated by the bidirectionality of language and communication, which is especially manifest at scale thanks to recent developments around

social media. Even as mass media platforms endure and grow to this day, platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok provide spaces for greater numbers of Internet users to share information and communicate ideas beyond the gatekeeping reach of traditional platforms. Combined with the speed at which information on social media perpetuates and the potential for social media to amplify a multitude of voices, ideas that are voiced and shared on social media have a power that can challenge, refute, and perhaps erase ideas that traditional platforms disseminate.

The power of social media provides a means for speakers to recontextualize language and apply new meanings that may conflict with their original intent and orientation. Gal (2018) calls this phenomenon "grafting," which is a more complex occurrence than a simple encoding of language, as evidenced by the following example:

*A quick example is the way the president of Russia justified the controversial military incursions by Russian forces into Ukraine in 2014. He invoked the "responsibility to protect" and other shibboleths of humanitarian discourse (Dunn & Bobick, 2014).*

*More generally, linguistic, social, and material practices that are indexical of existing authoritative personae and organizations (in this case, humanitarian ones) in one arena (international diplomacy) provide the sap (authority) for the graftings (practices) added to them from another arena (in this case, military invasion). The effect is like troping, as in parody. An analogy is formed. However, in parody the ironic or humorous effect comes from the recognition of a difference between two practices interdiscursively framed as "the same." (Gal, 2018:4)*

In this example, the use of humanitarian discourse to justify the use of military force is, as Gal puts it, a "parody." Under a critical lens, the discursive practices analysed for this discussion depict Russia's argument for a humanitarian rationale as little more than a disguise for invading Ukraine. A similar assertion can be made with regards to Russia's more recent incursion in Ukraine which President Vladimir Putin has sought to justify with the stated goal of protecting the ethnic Russian minority population in Ukraine from persecution by an allegedly neo-Nazi government. The stated need to "denazify" the region provides enough of a rationale to claim

a humanitarian purpose behind the 2022 invasion of Ukraine with the same sort of language traditionally crafted to justify more traditional humanitarian efforts such as aid work in and food shipments to developing countries.

A similar example revolves around the use of the term "fake news" particularly in Western political contexts. While it has arguably been an enduring phenomenon throughout the era of mass media, fake news perpetuated through disreputable news sites and social media has been shown to have had a consequential effect on the 2016 United States presidential election (Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020). In contemporary popular discourse, however, the phrase is often a derogatory epithet used against news media or other sources of information with which critics are not aligned. The then President, Donald J. Trump, often used "fake news" as an accusation to discredit information or journalists critical of his presidency (Tamul, Ivory, Hotter & Wolf, 2020). The development of language in this manner highlights that users of language can take utterances and recontextualize their meaning and purpose (while preserving much of their power) to suit their own ends, thus highlighting how authoritative messaging can be confounded by potentially bad actors or actors who adopt different worldviews.

Whereas the examples above show that language is used to justify intuitively conflicting intentions, this paper examines the act of grafting employed to more directly nullify the original intention altogether. The goal of the sort of grafting identified in this study is the same as that found above, in that a particular use of language is recontextualized in such a way that the two uses, when juxtaposed together, seem contradictory or incongruent with each other. The salient detail examined in this paper, however, deals with recontextualization that takes away the traditional power of the language. In the exemplars presented below, language that is meant to depict certain concepts or even people in a negative light is recontextualized in a favorable manner by those that are targeted by that language in the first place. Language users employing this sort of grafting thus nullify ideas and sociocultural identities that define others' characterizations of them and create new, more positive epistemologies that are more aligned to their perspectives. Ultimately, this, in conjunction with the velocity and volume of information that social media provides (Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020), also confounds authoritative

messaging that warrants discussion by public policy makers and public administrators with regards to mitigation and effective messaging.

## 4. The Study

This paper relies on an analysis of social media to capture patterns with respect to recontextualization of terminology used in online discourse. The goal of this study is to identify the concept of grafting defined by Gal (2018) to observe how language is reinterpreted to the extent that the phenomenon can confound public messaging. To that end, this study looks at terminology that is used by one discursive community to critique another (i.e. terminology that is derogatory or otherwise negative) and, in turn, employed by others in a manner that more positively aligns to their perspectives. In effect, the researchers looked for recontextualization in social media where a community uses terminology employed against them and recasts it in a way they find more appealing.

### 4.1 Data Collection

The researchers collected tweets through keyword-specific and location-specific searches. The Twitter platform embeds tweets with metadata that includes a user's location (usually provided by their smartphone or other mobile device with which they use Twitter). This allows for searches for tweets within a particular area and, more importantly, excluding tweets that may use the keywords of interest but are not ultimately related to a location-specific topic being explored in this study. These tweets were compiled in a database with universal resource links (URLs) and screenshots of texts for later reference in case authors delete their tweets later on.

### 4.2 Ethical Considerations

Tweets are largely available to the public and openly readable on the Internet, addressing the main ethical concerns with respect to privacy and confidentiality. That said, the authors acknowledge the potential for abuse and otherwise improper usage of essential and confidential information. As a result, the researchers removed any and all identifying information (e.g. real names, Twitter handles, work affiliations) from tweets that are collected and analyzed for this paper. Moreover, to further anonymize and prevent searches of social media data used in this paper, written representations of

tweets are paraphrased to mitigate the possibility of online searches while preserving as much of the meaning as possible.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

The study employs a composite theoretical lens beginning with a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) to allow for conceptual development of the phenomenon as the researchers perceive within the data. Tweets are coded by whether the researchers perceive the terminology in question is being used in a positive or negative manner, then coded for other characteristics that might further contextualize the use of the terminology. The data as coded are then analyzed through discussion of Gal's (2018) understanding of grafting to gain a sense of how meaning is embedded and re-embedded into the terminology in question.

## 5. Results and Discussion

During the course of data analysis, the researchers identified a number of terms at varying degrees of recontextualization as evidenced by how they are used by social media users. Given these variations, the researchers identified a series of stages, which can best be conceptualized along a continuum from no recontextualization to full recontextualization, where new meaning is grafted onto language as it is used and reused in social media discourse. The four exemplars below illustrate these stages, emphasizing the potential, gradual development of language over time.

### 5.1 "Deplorable"

The now-famous term "deplorable" is one that has undergone full recontextualization as it has been repeatedly recycled in social media discourse. While it is not a new word, it exists in contemporary social media discourse as a politically-charged term that has since been reinterpreted as a positive identity by those who feel they were targeted by this language. In this sense, the word "deplorable" has taken on almost the exact opposite connotation from that found in its original usage.

In the context of the 2016 United States presidential election, the then Democratic Party candidate, Hillary Rodham Clinton, was reported to have used the term "deplorable" to define supporters of the then Republican Party candidate, Donald J. Trump,

in what was perceived as a derogatory manner. The use of the word "deplorable" later entered the popular discourse as a means to more generally define right-wing extremists in the United States, but remains indexed to steadfast, almost irrational support of former President Trump. In turn, conservatives have since used the term as a badge of honor, accepting the word as associated to their political and cultural identity while rejecting the substance embedded within the intended use of the word.

Among many examples, two come to mind (with emphasis added) to highlight how American conservatives have grown comfortable with using a term they perceive to be used against them. The first tweet depicts "deplorables" as an enduring force that is characterized as positive and good when juxtaposed with Democrats who are seen as having a singular goal of character assassination:

*Democrats think destroying President Trump will solve their problems. They are foolish to think that the movement dies with him – assuming he can be destroyed.*

*But President Trump is real.*

*And, Deplorables won't go away.*

*NOT EVER. (tweet from July 2022)*

Tweets such as this clearly presents those aligned with the former president as a positive force. The tone of this tweet is far different than those that cast "deplorables" as toxic to the political discourse in the United States. As a result, the user who published this tweet signals to those aligned with the conservative cause that it is acceptable to take on the "deplorable" identity despite the use of the term in the years prior.

In turn, American conservatives on social media have used it to describe themselves or those they perceived to be like-minded in almost a neutral sense, long after negative connotations have been scrubbed and positive connotations have been embedded, such as the tweet below.

*Deplorable people will continue to oppose Biden's Electors! (tweet from August 2022)*

The phrase "deplorable people" as used in this tweet is not necessarily positive or negative. Rather,

the tweet describes the action (i.e. opposition to the 2020 United States presidential election) in a very matter-of-fact way, assuming that those who would likely take on the term as their own agree with the positive usage. As a result, the researchers characterize this term as having undergone full recontextualization, where further advocacy or reassurance about the new meaning is no longer necessary and people can feel free to use the term with those with whom they align.

## 5.2 "Sakoku" ("Isolated Country")

The term "*sakoku*", identified as a term used in current social media discourse to describe recent restrictions on travel into Japan, has a meticulously crafted history in Japan dating back to the days of European colonization of Asian countries. The shogunate, seeking to repel Spanish and Portuguese influence within 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan, restricted trade with and travel to and from other countries for over two and a half centuries. The ultra-conservative policy on interaction with foreigners has had an enduring influence on Japanese culture that continues to this day, as evidenced by the use of the term "*sakoku*" in contemporary discourse.

The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic forced many countries to close their borders to non-essential international travel, if not all travel altogether. In particular, Japan saw the closing of borders as an essential measure to mitigate the spread of the disease from travelers coming from abroad while the medical scientific community worked to develop vaccines and other remedies to COVID-19. Starting in late 2020, countries began to relax their border policies to allow for the resumption of travel as vaccines and customs for masking and social distancing provided a sense of security and safety for international travelers. However, among developed nations, Japan continued to have some of the most stringent border restrictions as late as mid-2022, and particularly in early 2022 when international students began in earnest to protest the restrictions imposed on student visas. The growing online protests employed terminology such as "cruel Japan" (a play on the phrase "Cool Japan" which is used to describe Japanese culture to a young international audience as hip and trendy) and "*sakoku*", likening COVID-19 border restrictions to the isolationist policies of old.

The traditional and contemporary uses of the term "*sakoku*" are intended to critique Japanese

policies and cultural attitudes regarding foreigners. International students who devoted financial resources to receiving an education in Japan and other groups of foreigners (e.g. those separated from family members already in Japan, those with work visas unable to enter the country for work) used this word to highlight hardships incurred by enduring restrictions on travel into Japan. As a result, users of the term "*sakoku*" in this context aim to judge Japanese policies and culture in a negative light.

Against this backdrop, a number of social media users mostly within Japan also use this term positively to describe a sense of safety from COVID-19 as well as the resulting tranquility that accompanies a lack of foreign tourists and other foreigners in the country. One such tweet paraphrased here, accompanied by pictures of Japanese comfort food, pointedly praises the idea of an isolated country where strangers are not present to pose a bother (emphasis added).

*Every person has their own tastes, but as someone from the countryside, I appreciate getting to eat fried food made by an eighth-generation tempura shop in Japan. I am also glad there are no strangers. Better than the tempura was the miso soup. The taste of bonito and the smell of Japanese seasoning combined with the taste of red miso. It would be good to stay in an isolated country forever. (tweet from February 2022)*

This user employs "*sakoku*" toward the end of a tweet that is largely about their experiences while eating out. In this sense, the discussion of "*sakoku*" is almost an afterthought in this tweet, given that the focus is largely devoted to the food. Nonetheless, its use here illustrates the benefits provided by the concept embedded in the term being used in this tweet.

Some tweets are more pointed in their criticism of foreigners, as is the case with the following tweet (emphasis added).

*Stop foreign workers from entering the country!*

*An isolated country is good*

*I'm not satisfied with Chinese people! (tweet from February 2022)*

In many tweets such as these, it is worth pointing out that COVID-19, the original rationale for the

contemporary border restrictions, is hardly mentioned if at all, as users employ the term "sakoku" to draw attention to the perceived positive effects, however unintentional, of border closures. At least from the perspective of those using the discourse in this way, emphasizing the connection between border closures and the reduced influence of foreigners makes what would otherwise be a toxic or negative term a more palatable one.

As a result, social media users who use "sakoku" in a positive sense, potentially, also perceive to have license to freely express ideas they feel align with isolationism, such as banning foreign workers or negatively judging foreigners based on their nationality or ethnicity. Putting aside the expressed discrimination in such tweets, that people feel comfortable with expressing such ideas also points to comfort with the language they are using when it otherwise be considered undesirable, as is the case in the next example:

*Let's make the number of people who can enter the country very small through a policy of an isolated country (tweet from February 2022)*

Here, isolationism continues to be promoted as a good thing but without any particular rationale for why it is good. Instead, the user publishing this tweet simply assumes that having an isolated country is something to strive for through the suggestion they put forward (i.e. limiting the number of foreigners entering Japan). However, there is not sufficient evidence that this term has undergone full recontextualization as is the case with the previous exemplar, as tweets that use the term primarily focus on advocacy of isolationism rather than treating the concept as an eventual or lasting circumstance. Nonetheless, the use of the term "sakoku" in the examples provided here create spaces for like-minded social media users to find comfort in the use of the term and belief in the concept when it would otherwise be treated as an undesirable eventuality.

### 5.3 "Tenderpreneur"

The following two exemplars illustrate language that has undergone little or no recontextualization. They are presented here to highlight the resiliency of embedded meaning, or at least the possibility that recontextualization is not necessarily a foregone conclusion. In African contexts,

the term "tenderpreneur" is a play on the term "entrepreneur" and can be considered a derogatory word to describe someone who uses political connections for personal, financial gain. It evokes a similar meaning to that of "oligarch" in that political influence dictates who is more likely to attain wealth and who is left behind. The term has gained awareness in common discourse in South Africa to the extent that political parties have used the term to critique each other on the issue of political corruption ("Tenderpreneurship is the stuff of crooked cadres & fighters, South African Government" n.d.).

As the term is circulated around social media with casual frequency, it becomes sanitized and achieves more of a neutral form, at least when one applies the term to themselves. One example of this act of sanitizing revolves around the gossip associating television presenter Bonang Matheba and Jeremy Chibuye, a Zambian considered by social media to be a tenderpreneur. Setting aside the rumors that both figures have other partners, the story provides an opportunity for social media to recontextualize the term "tenderpreneur" into a form that is less derogatory and more playful when social media users try to put themselves in Jeremy Chibuye's position.

*I want to be the tenderpreneur that gets her tongue! (tweet from July 2022)*

Another tweet treats the term "tenderpreneur" in a similar fashion that is not negative in characterization. In response to a viral tweet asking which careers are more lucrative than others, one social media user associates "tenderpreneur" with careers that produce millionaires.

*If you want to make billions, work in mining.*

*Millions, work as a commercial farmer, CA, lawyer, engineer, doctor, investment banker or tenderpreneur.*

*For a comfortable living... banking, insurance or IT. (tweet from August 2022)*

Within these two examples, the animosity associated with the term "tenderpreneur" is all but gone when taken out of political contexts and when used to talk about money and status. In these cases, being a tenderpreneur is less a bad or corrupt force and more a title one can adopt if they want to join the elite classes. That said, the researchers

did not find any particular tweets where users, as in the previous exemplars, felt comfortable to incorporate the terminology into their own identity or directly characterize it as a positive thing that warrants aspiration. There is an acknowledgment of an elite status afforded to tenderpreneurs, but little, if any, validation or refutation of the connotations of corruption and political favors embedded into the term. In this case, the extent of recontextualisation is less than that found in terms such as "deplorable" and "sakoku," highlighting that in some cases, the dominant or original meaning is resilient enough to endure the co-construction of meaning in social media, even if it is used in a neutral sense at times.

#### 5.4 "Struggle Credentials"

The last exemplar discussed in this paper has experienced little or no recontextualization so as to further demonstrate that meaning embedded in language can remain resilient to change. In the South African context, "struggle credentials" is a term social media users employ to negatively characterize officials and other political figures they perceive as using past economic and political struggles, particularly experienced during apartheid, as a shield against criticism. The intended use of the term ultimately serves as a critique against the perception that people hide behind such struggles as an excuse for political inaction and corruption.

A search for tweets with the words "struggle credentials" finds that the meaning embedded in the term is generally accepted as negative and toxic. Two example tweets shown here are indicative of the enduring connotations associated with the term, juxtaposed with few, if any, attempts to frame the term in a positive manner.

*The false notion that struggle credentials are more important than getting things done is what keeps Africa bound to leaders with outdated ideas. (tweet from July 2022)*

The first tweet reinforces the negative meanings embedded with the idea of "struggle credentials," that they are employed mainly by politicians who do not accomplish things and who impede progress as perceived by this social media user. Most tweets that employ this term are politically charged. Taken out of political contexts, the term appears to retain its negative connotations when social media users mock themselves, as is the case in the next example.

Attached to the next tweet is a picture of outdated mobile phones that the social media user says they found in old possessions.

*I was looking through my stuff. I found these.*

*I also have struggle credentials. [laughing emoji]  
(tweet from August 2022)*

While this tweet uses "struggle credentials" in a less negative sense, it nonetheless seeks to minimize the importance and power of the struggle by associating the term with outdated possessions such as old mobile phones. The use of the term in this sense is evidence of recontextualization of language but not in a manner where negative values are replaced by positive ones. Overall, "struggle credentials" remains a negative term that few, if any, social media users seek to incorporate into their own identity as a positive characteristic.

## 6. Discussion

The exemplars presented above demonstrate how social media allows users to sanitize language that is traditionally considered unpalatable, not to make such language objectively, universally good, but to provide users against whom such language is targeted a means to incorporate it into their identity and perspectives. The discussion of exemplars from various countries seeks to also highlight the phenomenon of grafting is not specific to any one context, and should indeed be an issue for public policy makers and public administrators to take into consideration with respect to messaging. This discussion regarding the shifting values attributed to language holds implications for the crafting of messaging for public policy, as discourse shaped by social media evolves at a pace and scale beyond which mass mediation cannot fully address.

This paper examines one linguistic phenomenon among many that confounds any straightforward influence between public policy messaging and its intended audiences, particularly as the meanings and values embedded into language evolves in social media spheres outside of official control or approval. The research discussed here reaffirms Druckman's (2001) treatise on message framing while emphasizing the role that social media plays in complicating how audiences interact with message frames and recontextualize them to their own beliefs and preferences. The role of policy makers and officials

responsible for public messaging would do well to take this dynamic interaction into greater consideration when crafting messages intended to effectively facilitate common cause among mass audiences.

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