POTHOLES AND POWER: A MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF 'LOOK AT THIS F*CKIN' STREET' ON INSTAGRAM

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Introduction

New Orleans' municipal government is plagued by a crisis of trust due to systemic failures across city services and infrastructure. This has created fertile ground for citizens to discursively challenge the underlying power relationship through connective action. Look At This Fuckin' Street (LATFS) is an Instagram account based in New Orleans with a stated mission of "documenting the cracked and sinking streets of the Crescent City." The account tends to use humor and visuals in tandem to effectively create a more publicly accountable visual version of 311. Relying on user submissions, it functions as a crowdsourced and real-time collection of the most egregious examples of deteriorating streets and sidewalks, failed repairs, and the like. The account manager insists on public anonymity, but I received direct non-anonymous access to the manager for the purpose of this research along with full access to the entirety of the account's data.

Literature Review

The case study offered here aims to contribute to scholarship across three primary areas. First, I argue that LATFS represents a novel approach to political engagement on social media as a hyperlocal phenomenon that uses connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) fueled by humor and shaming to challenge the power of the municipal government. Second, I contribute to ongoing work around digital media and urban space via analyzing how citizens as Instagram users engage in the ongoing shaping and reshaping of the city through LATFS. Boy and Uitermark (2017) call this 'reassembling' and focus on how this occurs recursively via mobilizing representation of specific places. Third, I aim to add to scholarship via a localized case study that foregrounds issues around maintenance and repair, the operation and politics of which are most often invisible (Graham and Thrift 2007). Maintenance and repair of infrastructure involve choices that indicate underlying values, so the LATFS discourses

around failed infrastructure demonstrate how repair and maintenance are both an engine and a reflection of racism, inequality, and unequal resource allocation.

Context in New Orleans

The lack of trust in the municipal government has deep historical roots but is exacerbated by overlapping and interlocking recent instances of failure and corruption. The condition of road infrastructure is particularly problematic given how widespread it is throughout the city and the material ways that it affects nearly all citizens. These road issues are visible to all, often have physical consequences for vehicles, and persist across every neighborhood in the city. A 2017 study found that 69% of roads are in either poor or mediocre condition and poor road infrastructure costs New Orleans drivers an average of $657 in additional costs per year (TRIP 2019).

Research Questions

Given this context, I am interested in looking closely at LATFS to address two core questions:

RQ$_1$: How does LATFS serve as a discursive tool for people to challenge power relations between citizens and city agencies?

RQ$_2$: Considered as a means of political engagement on social media, what discursive and material aims is LATFS capable of addressing?

Methods and Data

To analyze my data, I employed multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) to understand how the various textual and visual discourses found within LATFS challenge power relations within the municipal context. Foundationally, I take my approach from Fairclough's (2003) socio-cultural approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA), which is a three-dimensional framework for the analysis of text and discourse and thus views discourse as simultaneously a text, discourse practice, and socio-cultural practice. MCDA broadens analysis to all relevant discursive modalities (Machin and Mayr 2012). In the case of LATFS, I will consider visuals, post metadata, comments, and captions. I utilized an open coding process for analysis, which is based in grounded theory.

Via an existing personal relationship, I gained access to the anonymous account manager and initially communicated via Direct Message (DM). The exported full account data for LATFS was downloaded on November 22nd, 2022, and was passed to me in unmodified .zip files directly from Instagram. The size of the total data export is 15.9 GB.

Emerging Themes

I uncovered three major themes in these discourses: mocking, shaming, and exposing.

There are three techniques that comprise the general approach to mockery: joking, silliness, and factual information. I operationalize joking as humor that is devoid of anger or bitterness and is often part of a collective that shares variations on a thematically or discursively organized joke. In contrast, silliness is defined as absurd and irreverent joking. Finally, ostensibly factual information is used in this category to highlight failures that are humorous or ironic in nature.

Per Scheff (2003), I understand shame as a complex emotion that can be defined as a negative evaluation of oneself or one's actions that may result in feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, worthlessness, or humiliation. This is explicitly distinguished from guilt (a feeling tied to specific actions) and embarrassment, which is a shorter-term emotion confined to narrower social circumstances. Eight techniques characterize how LATFS enables shaming as a practice that seeks to undermine power: anger, bitterness, sarcasm, factual information, indignation, cynicism, criticizing other city services, and moving the account's influence offline.

Exposing most closely resembles citizen journalism, which Greer and McLaughlin (2010) define as the practice of everyday citizens producing and disseminating news. Citizen journalism is particularly important in that it gives individuals the power to challenge the official version of events and issues. Three techniques contribute to this. Just as with mocking and shaming, factual information is also employed here but with the intention of directly and objectively communicating facts free from emotional valence or editorializing about their meaning. Next, the use of explanations supports the work of exposing failures by describing the reasons for problems as well as (often simple) potential repairs. Finally, LATFS strategically employs visual framing in videos and images to provide fuller context on a problem and in doing so, preempts many excuses while highlighting the depth and scope of problems.

Conclusion

The findings of this analysis suggest that LATFS uses multiple discursive techniques to challenge the power dynamics at play in the ongoing infrastructure issues in New Orleans and undermine the competence and legitimacy of its municipal government. The account's stated mission of documenting and highlighting the cracked and sinking streets of the city serves as a powerful tool for amplifying the voices and concerns of everyday citizens and holding those in power accountable. By bringing attention to these issues through the dissemination of user-submitted photos and videos, the account creates a space for open and honest discussions about the systemic problems that plague the city's infrastructure. I argue that LATFS is an effective and powerful participatory platform for exposing a broad range of systemic problems and their causes, allowing residents to take back the narrative of their city's infrastructure challenges, diminish and demean the powerful interests responsible, and ultimately attempt to reclaim the power lost to negligent or even bad-faith municipal authorities in New Orleans. Given the way that discourses tend to expand the critique beyond road infrastructure to criticism of various city services and utility monopolies, the page ultimately seems to serve as an outlet for frustration with a broadly dysfunctional city.

References

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