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EDUCATED USERS: REFINING MANNERS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA CORPORATE CURRICULUMS

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In current mediatized discourses, the psychological, social, and political costs of social media appear widespread and many. Whether increasing user anxiety and depression (Yoon et al, 2019), cultivating online misogyny and racialized abuse (Bailey, 2021), or contributing to political polarisation (Suarez Estrada, 2022), the idea that platforms perpetuate certain ‘toxic’ tendencies is now an almost banal statement (Dinnen, 2018). Notwithstanding the dubious nominal accuracy of this term (Gibson et al., 2023), and recognizing the fact that social media also brings solidarity, joy and purpose to many lives across the world, platforms have nevertheless been at pains to emphasise both their awareness of these issues and their proactive responses to them. Facebook’s Oversight Board, for example, comprises a network of independent internet experts that seemingly hold their services to account through roundtables, white papers, and appeals processes (Oversight Board, 2024). Elsewhere, the X Transparency Center presents and reflects on the governmental, internal, and community regulations it has implemented on the platform (X, 2022). Such procedures can be usefully understood as a form of corporate social responsibility (Banerjee, 2008), a process of *proprietary enframing* (Langlois & Elmer, 2013) whereby companies seek to pre-empt and curtail any potential criticisms of its business practices through its own funded research, public statements, self-regulation, and philanthropic endeavours.

Yet while these highly publicised interventions have been rightly critiqued as attempts to restrict the terms available to hold social media to account (Gillespie, 2023), these are not the only means through which social media companies are currently seeking to shape both the narrative surrounding and actual use of their services. This article will examine another currently understudied and worrying modality within which social

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media companies are looking to exert their influence: corporate curriculums of healthy, safe, and educated use. Chiefly, we will scrutinise the modes through which social media companies create, disseminate and deliver digital literacy curriculums to educators, parents, caregivers, and users through free-to-access online materials. These resources vary depending on their imagined audience, yet, following the thought of Norbert Elias (2000), we connect them together as part of broader attempts to *refine the manners* of human groups according to (contingent) values and beliefs, and which, in doing so, serve the capitalist interests of powerful global institutions seeking to enforce them. Upon this basis, our paper asks: What is the specific content of social media curriculums of safe, healthy and educated use? And how do these educational resources inculcate certain manners of use, for whom, and with what implications?

Our paper adopts a practice-oriented document analysis approach (Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022) to examine how one particular company, Meta, targets various audiences with specific tips or lessons on manners of healthy, safe and educated use. First, we provide a textual content analysis of Meta's *GetDigital* program, which provides free digital literacy materials to youth, parents and caregivers, and educators in the UK and US. These materials, created during the pandemic, include lesson plans, homework activities, and information that variously educate these groups on the positives and dangers of social media. These are grouped beneath five distinct pillars: Digital foundations, which establishes the basics of data privacy; Digital wellness, which promotes well-being online; Digital engagement, which offers ways to evaluate information and build inclusive digital communities; Digital empowerment, which focuses on social media activism; and Digital opportunities, which develop skills for future careers in technology (Facebook, 2020). Secondly, we move our attention outside of the classroom and onto one particular platform, Instagram. Specifically, we examine Instagram's user *Guides* and *Programs*, which offer tailored information and activities targeted at families and teens (Instagram, 2024). These resources address six themed topics: Pressure to be Perfect, Speaking Authentically, Promoting Compassion, Fostering Body Acceptance, Creatively Combating Bullying, Teen Counter Speech Fellowship, Managing Time Online, and Encouraging Kindness.

Our research is a work in progress, yet preliminary findings indicate that the ideal modes of healthy, safe, and educated use proposed by Meta in these materials, and the type of digital literacy constructed through them, is a distinctly responsibilized prospect, primarily operating through self-controlled habits, and verified in relation to neoliberal behaviourist ideologies of individualised action (Docherty, 2021). We understand this as an attempt to cultivate the conduct and manners of users in directions that further the interests of platforms themselves. Specifically, we theoretically interpret this as a conduct of conduct in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1983) and a refinement of manners in Elias's terminology. We show that by loading the pressure on individuals to protect themselves against the 'toxicity' of platforms, social media companies are seeking to absolve themselves from the responsibility to meaningfully address the potentially harmful aspects of their services, either through changes in design, content

moderation, or regulation. This move at once constitutes a performance of corporate responsibility, responding to the aforementioned criticisms that have been levelled at platforms in recent years, while diverting attention away from the exploitative capitalist logics motivating their operations (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2017).

Our paper explicates the implications of this situation in relation to the *corporate curriculum* (Manning, 1999), which refers to efforts made by corporate actors to ‘centre, legitimise, and entrench a set of beliefs’ (Tannock, 2020, p.1.) in the public which align with their own business interests. Other examples include ‘petro-pedagogies’, whereby oil companies have provided free science and engineering resources to schools (which stress the necessity of oil products in society and reject the science of climate change (Eaton & Day, 2020)); and the food industry providing free school curriculums for home economics, nutrition, and physical education, such as those disseminated by Coca-Cola, Nestle, and McDonalds (Powell, 2019). Our paper deepens the notion of the corporate curriculum to show how it entwines with what Elias terms the civilising processes of modernity (Elias, 2000), “a change of human conduct and sentiment” (p.365) that establishes self-regulation as the key activity toward the imagined flourishing of rational communities. Whereas Elias identified Western European etiquette guides as key instructional devices to this civilising process, of the thirteenth century onwards, our paper presents social media corporate curriculums of healthy, safe, and educated use as one aspect of its present-day digital incarnation.

In this way, our paper responds closely to the conference theme by examining how industrial social media actors currently mobilise corporate curriculums to target the conduct and manners of users toward certain strategic goals, specifically by using existing moral institutions such as the school and the family to do so. Our paper is empirically significant by presenting an in-depth analysis of this entwinement through an examination of Meta’s digital literacy learning materials, clarifying who they target, and with what political implications. In doing so, we advance a severely understudied area of research identified by Higdon & Butler (2022). Additionally, our paper is theoretically innovative by developing our understanding of the corporate curriculum through the work of Foucault and Elias, in turn advancing recent scholarship that examines social media in terms of its civilising infrastructure (Hallinan, 2021). Overall, by highlighting the cultural, normative and political limits of social media’s corporate curriculum, our paper will embolden the call to develop more critical and inventive digital literacies in response to the potentially damaging datafied machinations of platforms (Markham, 2019, 2020; Tironi & Valderrama, 2021). Here, we promote a problematization of current forms of governance in digitised societies, rather than an acceptance of their parameters, and place authority in the hands of situated users themselves to discover resistive strategies against them, rather than in the hands of the industry actors who have constructed their constraining thresholds in the first place.

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