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Research in Context

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“The good of a book lies in its being read. A book is made up of signs that speak of other signs, which in turn speak of things. Without an eye to read them, a book contains signs that produces no concept; therefore, it is dumb.” Umberto Eco quoted in The Book of Informatics Hobbs et al (2011) Using this quotation, critically discuss it in relation to the contemporary media and debate whether you think we, as a society are being taught to not read the signs of modern life

Throughout this text, I will be attempting to further explore the words of Umberto Eco, who says “The good of a book lies in its being read. A book is made up of signs that speak of other signs, which in turn speak of things. Without an eye to read them, a book contains signs that produce no concept; therefore, it is dumb.” I will be discussing this in relation to the contemporary media and whether society is being taught not to read the signs of modern life.

It would thus, to first take a closer look at signs and concepts. Before further exploring their relationship, signs are composed of two components; The first is the signifier, the tangible element of a sign. The signifier is the object or physical being involved in the sign. The second is the signified. The signified is the intangible concept attached to the physical signifier. Ferdinand De Saussure was behind many models of thought not just on signs and semiotics, but also on communication. Saussure’s Dyadic (two-part) [see fig 1] model of signs is the only Saussurean model that befits the task at hand, which will be assessing whether society is collectively being taught not to read signs.

When looking at media as a sign itself. It could be argued that we’re being taught to misread certain signs, and as a society we are constantly at risk of believing signs to be true, when they’re fake. The phenomenon in which people are seen to be believing fake signs in the media is called fake news. Fake news is read every day and is read by millions (Buchanan, 2020). There is a difference between fake news and inaccurate reporting, where fake news is deliberately created to a misleading end, whereas inaccurate reporting tends to be more down to errors or oversights as opposed to deliberately intending to mislead (Molina, Sundar, Le and Lee, 2019). According to online journalism site Journolink, “45% of adults in the UK believe they encounter fake news every day” (JournoLink, 2021).

200 million monthly engagements with fake news.

IPSO – Who they are and what they do

IPSO complaints rise between 2015 and 2018

It’s arguable that fake news, from a semiotics perspective, is the use and sometimes manipulation of signifiers, such as tangible data, to then contort it to meet their desired signifieds to further their agenda. Fake news is

created for malicious purposes, yet is read as truth by millions. It is reported through Journalinks research, that there were “200 million monthly engagements with fake news stories on Facebook”. (Journolink, 2021) That is a massive number of people that are consuming fake news, and in some cases sharing it without understanding the ramifications. According to Exeter’s “Libguide”, consequences can include things such as “distrust in the media”, provision of “a platform for conspiracy theories and hate speech”, and “spread of false or discredited science”. (Libguide, 2021)

The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) is the regulatory body for news and magazines within the UK. Their job is to ensure that only accurate stories are published in the mainstream media, handling any regulatory complaints against a news or magazine story, taking action against companies where a breach is established. An example of an accuracy breach would be an article published by The Sun on the 6th March 2021 (Zeltmann, 2021). The article in question outlined “what classrooms will look like” when children returned to school. It was found that given no requirements or guidance was set out for schools at this time, the article was inaccurate and misleading (IPSO, 2020). The Sun seemed to draw on signifiers that, over time, we’ve learned to associate with COVID-19 safety, and use them to lead us to their desired signified of a COVID-safe classroom.

Based on the mass consumption of fake news, specifically the 200 million monthly engagements with fake news on Facebook, it would be fair to say that modern media is teaching society to read signs which speak of things, but fake things as well as true ones. When Umberto Eco (Hobbs et al, 2011) says that “A book is made up of signs, that speak of other signs, which in turn speak of things”, he seems to be referring to the relationship between signs and their associated concepts. The fake news phenomenon does speak to our relationship with understanding signs, but it doesn’t point to a society incapable of reading signs. That being said, our increasingly technological life, it could be argued, is making us less able to read the signs of modern life, such as interpersonal cues, body language, romantic interest and more (Coopersmith, 2017).

Signs aren’t just in books, they’re everywhere. Because of this, the need for us as a society to be able to read the signs of modern life are crucial to our success personally, professionally and academically. According to Giedd (2012), studies have shown that today’s youth develop both their emotional and social skills online and via a mobile device. Social media sites such as TikTok and Instagram among others, encourage the younger

generations to have less face-to-face time and spend more time socially isolating from the outside world. This then has a knock-on effect when it comes to reading the signs of modern life in terms of socialisation.

The signs of modern life also include understanding the signs of how we interact with each other. It could be argued that we, as a society, are slowly learning less about signs of modern life as our lives become technologically richer. This technological enrichment has seen non-screen playtime for children decrease by 20% between 1997-2003 (Hofferth, 2010). It would be fair to assume that, given the technological advancements in terms of video games and social media, that non-screen playtime may have further decreased since then. When we compare older generations, who didn't have as much technology, to the younger generations that even grew up with technology, some more than others, there could be merit to the argument that our ability to read signs in people has decreased. According to DiverseEducation, millennials, defined as being born between 1980-1998, have fewer social skills and more social awkwardness than previous generations (Watson, 2015). This social awkwardness comes from our collective inability to pick up on each other's non-verbal communication. This non-verbal communication is essentially us being unable to read the signs others are giving off.

When it comes to exploring the signs of modern life, we must take into account all signs. Whether they be as small and insignificant as reading someone's body language during a casual conversation, or as wide-reaching and catastrophically impacting as the climate change crisis, it all matters. It could be argued that there are signs in front of us every day in what we read (Kisak, 2016). Whether it be news, blogs, fictional books or non-fictional books, all of them have signs. Not all signs are easily recognisable however, with some reading between the lines necessary to fully understand. When it comes to the online world however, news is often published in a way that requires little to no extra thought behind what lies on the page. There are different news start-ups coming out of the woodwork every day, each with their own agenda and political lean, meaning skewed narratives are inevitable. The problem with these skewed narratives is that they are taking signifiers (the tangible) and attempting to attach signifieds (intangible concepts) to them to further their agenda. This means that signs are having concepts attached that suit the writer's beliefs. Although reporting is supposed to be objective and lay out the facts, it's debatable as to whether or not it's even possible to remain completely objective (Scheufele & Krause, 2019).

In this technologically advanced world, signs are everywhere online. Drawing on a statistic from earlier there was, at one point, 200 million engagements with fake news in a single month on Facebook (SEIPR, 2021). Facebook plays a large role in the media we do and don't read. This is because, many of us spend large amounts of time scrolling through our news feed. The news feed is where a mixture of shared articles and sponsored articles, as well as followed creator's articles, are shown to us (Facebook, 2021). When we see an interesting image or a gripping headline, we click to read it. According to Newberry (2021), Facebook's 2.4 billion users spend an average of 34 minutes per day using the social media site. Although there was no data on engagement with news articles on a user-by-user basis, it could arguably be inferred that the total news engagement through Facebook would far exceed the 200 million engagements with fake news.

So far we've discussed how news outlets and fake news can manipulate or skew the signifier into meeting their desired outcomes, but another important thing to highlight is misinterpretation of signifiers as a consumer or reader. Just as news outlets can manipulate signifiers to meet the desired signified, a reader could read the signifiers, and see a completely different signified (Hugh, 2009). This can sometimes lead to things like radical beliefs of false information. A prime example is the anti-vaxxer community. Not only do anti-vaxxers believe that vaccinations are horrendously dangerous and a government plot (Lee, 2021), but they also skew the narrative of certain events to further their cause and credibility. For example, a doctor had a COVID-19 vaccine 18 days prior to his death, and the anti-vaxxer community "flooded the internet" with fake news, reporting that the doctor's death was due to the vaccine. In actual fact, the doctor had died from a quick and sudden drop of platelets, passing away due to resulting complications (Thompson, 2021). These anti-vaxxers took the signifier of a man's death, attached another irrelevant signifier, the COVID-19 vaccine, and then created a signified that suited their narrative.

On the other side of the debate on whether or not society is being taught not to read signs, it could be argued that we are actually better at reading signs in some places than ever before. A perfect example would be the explosion of meme culture. Memes are graphical images that try to relay a point using signifiers, usually in a textual-graphical hybrid or just pure graphics (Rogers, 2021). To put it simply memes are images that, whether they contain text or not, drive a graphical point home. Although memes are typically comedic in nature, they can often drive home a deeper point which can even be political in nature.

On the one hand, memes are a great example of how people have learned how to read between the lines graphically and pick up on signs. Whether we like it or not, memes are deeply ingrained into our society, and they show us that we are more capable of picking up on a sign-based form of non-verbal communication (Cannizzaro, 2021). On the other hand, there seems to be an alarming trend of politicization within meme creation. There are two examples of politicization that we'll look at to assess the difference in how they use signifiers to achieve their very different goals.

On the lighter side of the political scale, you have activism which aims to use the signifiers to draw towards a signified concept of something important. An example of this would be Andrew Boyd, who likened memes to a "media virus". Boyd (2021), when writing mentions a "guerrilla war of signs". It could be argued, given how reliant memes are on signs and signifiers, that Boyd is correct in what he said. Using memes to achieve a political goal, activist or not, still relies on people reading signs. In his quest to highlight financial corruption within politics and wealth inequality, he relied heavily on his war of signs. From the logo, right through to in-person demonstrations, there was almost always a graphical element to his activism during this campaign. There are exceptions, where he appeared on radio shows for example, where graphical signs weren't used because they couldn't be.

On the darker side of the political spectrum, there are groups that wish to alter, manipulate or misappropriate signifiers to attach signifieds that meet their sometimes-twisted agendas. It would be ignorant of me not to mention white supremacy given the assignment brief's mention of Holocaust Memorial Day. White supremacists are a race based belief system that holds the ignorant and misguided belief that being white makes them somehow better (ADL, 2021). So twisted is their belief system that they are also highly anti-Semitic, regardless of skin colour. These beliefs about race and anti-Semitism are closely linked to the Nazi belief system, which is why white supremacists are also known as Neo-Nazis. The Nazis had severely anti-Semitic views, which were then spread to the public by signs used in propaganda campaigns (USHMM, 2021). The US Holocaust Memorial Museum shows the use of graphical signs in an attempt further alienate Jewish people as communists. Truly horrifying things such as innocent people being taken from their homes were made acceptable to the German public using propaganda, but more horrifying still is the fact that Neo-Nazis are still making propaganda today through memes. Through the use of hate symbols such as "the happy merchant" (ADL, 2021), Neo-Nazis seem to use common hate symbols with varying other accompanying

signifiers to create a hateful signified. On the Anti-Defamation League website, there is educational material that can help otherwise ignorant people identify wrong and hateful signs of modern life.

Throughout the exploration, different aspects of the modern media including social media have been touched upon. When asking if we as a society are being taught not to read signs, I couldn't find any evidence to support a yes answer. Instead, if anything it's much more arguable that we as a society are misreading more than not seeing signs of modern life. In terms of what we read and what we see when it comes to social media, people aren't just simply not seeing the signs, but instead are being exposed to signs that in some cases are either incorrect, fake or hateful. It is also highly arguable that we as a society are better at reading graphical signs than ever, thanks to meme culture. Memes aren't always just straight forward text to outline the context and the point of it, and sometimes it even requires reading between the lines to understand the full meaning of the meme. This means that our abilities to understand, process, and make connections with graphical signifiers to further understand the signifieds surrounding them is higher than ever before. Since the introduction of social media to the masses, our entire understanding of signs in modern life has been irreparably altered. Before the age of social media, our news cycle was a gated community where only those who could be held accountable reported news. Since social media allows any news story to replicate like wildfire if it's interesting enough to the reader who will be potentially sharing it.

APPENDIX

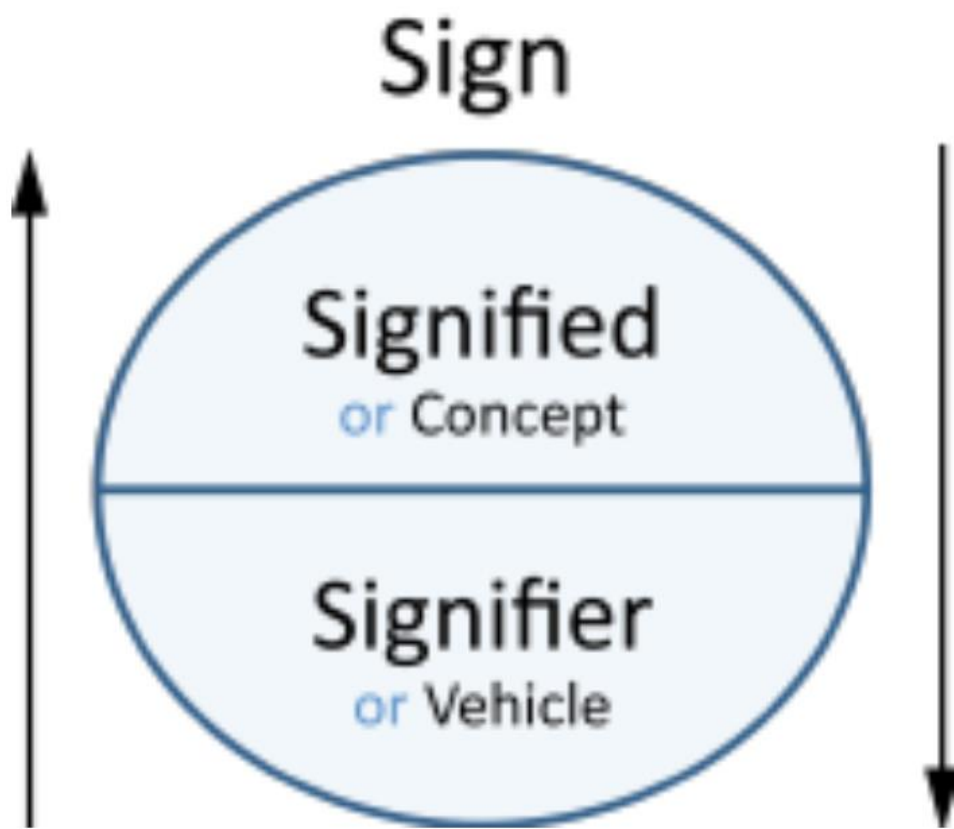


Fig 1 – Saussurean Model of Sign, Kehrer, J

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