CYBER-METAPRAGMATICS AND ALTERITY ON *reddit.com*

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ABSTRACT

Building on recent work in linguistic anthropology, this paper addresses textually mediated participatory practices on the online platform reddit.com. The primary focus is on forms of discourse participation that are unique to online environments—voting, creating subreddits, commenting on threads—and their relationship to the “ideological intervention” that maps sociocultural meaning onto contextual language use whenever and wherever it occurs. First I examine how users of reddit appropriate, re-present, and (usually, derisively) caption sample utterances posted to another online platform, tumblr.com. I am able to show how the online environment facilitates the display and re-entextualization of “others’” speech, and here I draw parallels with Miyako Inoue’s discussion of the print-mediated metapragmatics of citation that played a central role in the creation of the Japanese schoolgirl stereotype: both are based on overheard utterances. What is it that enables reddit’s users to interpret and participate in the ritualistic displacement and re-entextualization of others’ speech (e.g. Tumblr posts on reddit forums such as /r/TumblrInAction)? In order to illustrate the participatory semiotic processes that constitute and reproduce these everyday online practices, I introduce the concept of cyber-metapragmatic knowledge. Commentators have extolled the “disruptive” and creative potential of online communication; I show how the voting system on reddit, which provides linear order to reddit submissions, functions as a force for social control, whose conceptual foundation in an ostensibly democratic ideology masks the work it does to rationalize the hegemony of pre-established narratives. Lastly, I discuss other reddit forums that (meta-) textually engage with reddit itself, to emphasize the generativity of the cyber-metapragmatic function in enabling users to engage creatively (and playfully) with the semiotic mechanisms that enable the signification of community, as well as alterity.
Cyber-metapragmatics and alterity on reddit.com

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I. Introduction

This paper presents an overview of participatory discursive practices on the website reddit.com that is informed by recent work in linguistic anthropology (Silverstein 1993, 2003, Inoue 2006) and attempts to develop the empirical methods and analytic tools that are needed to describe the ways in which online metapragmatics are realized through modes of textual participation unique to internet-mediated communication. Certain online practices—“liking” Facebook posts, attaching JPEGs to emails, commenting and voting on forum threads, and so on—seem without obvious sociohistorical or textual precedent, especially when one considers the ease with which nearly anyone can participate in such practices. Following much recent work in linguistic anthropology I assume that it is through participation in discourse that participants’ “relational identities are presupposed and creatively (trans)formed” (Silverstein 2003: 193). Here I examine representations of “Tumblr discourse” on reddit.com and the techno-semiotic logic by which it is contained and reified as a metapragmatic category. The voting system at the heart of participation on reddit is of note, as it can act as a force for social control that crystallizes the theoretically dynamic social significance of situated language use, under the guise of democratic free expression. In particular, I argue that the voting system both makes possible and rationalizes the dominance of misogynistic narratives about Tumblr users on one particular subreddit, r/TumblrInAction. Because I am concerned with the metapragmatic indices within explicitly delineated cyberspaces (and not “cultures”), and because of the unique intertextual tools afforded by

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1 This paper began in May 2016 as a term paper for Educ 546, Sociolinguistics in Education, a course taught by Dr. Robert Moore of the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education, who contributed substantially and graciously to its present form. The May 2016 version received an award as co-winner of “Best Undergraduate Essay” from the Society for Linguistic Anthropology (American Anthropological Association).

2 The terms post/submission and their corresponding verbs post/submit are used interchangeably throughout.
online interaction, I introduce the term *cyber-metapragmatics* to describe the role of online communicative tools in the emergent construction of such indices.

In the following section, I will further introduce Silverstein’s notions of ethno-metapragmatics and indexical order, as well as Inoue’s (2006) analysis of the role of the “citational metapragmatics” of print media in the establishment of the Japanese schoolgirl as a metapragmatic category. Using the frameworks laid forth by Silverstein and Inoue as theoretical springboards, I will then provide a brief outline of the participatory culture of reddit before engaging with particular interactions on the reddit forum /r/TumblrInAction to illustrate my notion of *cyber-metapragmatics*. I will finally examine the role of the voting algorithm, detailing its role in the consolidation and reproduction of metapragmatic narratives surrounding Tumblr talk, before my concluding discussion.

II. Theoretical Background

A. Silversteinian ethno-metapragmatics and indexical order

Michael Silverstein’s notions of *ethno-metapragmatics* (1979) and *indexical order* (2003) introduce useful programs for conceptualizing the ideological mapping of social signification onto situated language use. Whereas much of the sociolinguistic canon explicitly or implicitly asserts an essentialist relationship between linguistic variation and social identity, indexical order “is central to analyzing how semiotic agents access macro-sociological plane categories and concepts as values in the indexable realm of the micro-contextual” (Silverstein 2003: 193). In other words, indexical order conceptually foregrounds the semiotic and ideological processes by which linguistic variation *acquires and creates meaning in context*, rather than emphasizing static relationships between linguistic variation and social meaning. Though Silverstein discusses indexical order mostly in the context of lexical and sociophonetic variation, his framework is crucial to our discussion of
the ideological processes by which online discursive categories acquire social signification: thanks to the anonymity of online communication, the analyst cannot have recourse to the traditionally conceived “identity” of discourse participants.

To illustrate Silverstein’s notions with a classic sociolinguistic example, consider Eckert’s (2000) studies on the speech of white high school students in the suburbs of Detroit, in which she “found that the differential use of variables constituted distinct styles associated with different communities of practice: the school-oriented jocks and the urban-oriented and school-alienated burnouts” (Eckert 2008: 458). Her analysis revealed that the burnouts were the most prominent users of Northern Cities Shift (NCS) variants and negative concord, both “urban” features, despite that all of the high school students in question were brought up in the same suburban locale. By using urban features in their speech, burnouts were not claiming to be from the city, but were instead accessing a sociocultural association (urban ⇔ tough, streetwise) ideologically embedded within, or mapped onto, a linguistic distinction by means of participation in discourse. As such, the variation between NCS and non-NCS variants is not construed as a direct consequence of social realities, but instead as “an indexical system that embeds ideology in language and that is in turn part and parcel of the construction of ideology” (Eckert 2008: 453).

The correspondence between NCS variants and geographic (i.e., urban and regional) identity is what Silverstein calls a first-order indexical, which “simply indexes membership in a population”; nevertheless, “the social evaluation of a population is always available to become associated with the index and to be internalized in speakers’ own dialectal variability to index specific elements of character” (Eckert 2008: 463). This association is effected by an “ideological intervention” that “functions characteristically as a cultural construal of the n-th order usage, what we term an ethno-metapragmatics of such usage” (Silverstein 2003: 194). Put otherwise, ethno-metapragmatics functions as the ideological glue that dialectically
links a given usage to a particular—but contextually non-deterministic—social meaning. Gumperz (1968) invokes a similar distinction, between “dialectal” and “superposed” variation, wherein dialectal variation distinguishes different in-groups, whereas superposed variation is invoked by members of a community to index particular social contexts or metapragmatic evaluations. Metapragmatic knowledge can be explicitly realized (“You sound uneducated if you pronounce *fight* as *foyt*”), but “in general the most robust and effective metapragmatic function is implicit,” realized “in cotextual organization itself, that is, in token co-occurrence patterns of emergent entextualization itself” (Silverstein 2003: 196; my emphasis). The “macro-sociological” signification of the nth-order indexical is contingent upon the conditions of the “micro-contextual” discursive act in which it is invoked; in Eckert’s study, the burnouts found the qualities associated with urbanity desirable (tough, streetwise, independent), while for the jocks, they were construed as the opposite (uneducated, thuggish).

In our discussion of representations of Tumblr on reddit, we will return to the notions of indexical order and ethno-metapragmatics to illuminate the processes of “emergent entextualization” that constitute participation on reddit, and the role played by such intertextual processes in the discursive imposition of meaning onto situated language use.

B. Inoue’s citational metapragmatics

Drawing from Silversteinian metapragmatics and Foucauldian discourse studies, Inoue’s 2006 chapter explores “the historical conditions of possibility” that allowed for the construction of the Japanese schoolgirl (*jogakusei*) as a signifier, and the gendered hermeneutics that indexically linked it to a signification. Inoue is far from the only scholar to pursue such an analysis (see, for example, Moore 2011a, 2011b), but given her emphasis on gender and media I have chosen to use her work as a starting point. Catalyzed by an influx of
Enlightenment-era European texts into Japan in the 1870s, Japanese elites of the early Meiji era began to see women’s education as a necessary component of modernized society. Whereas previous Japanese ideals of citizenship were “inescapably gendered,” lacking meaningful roles for women, the Education Order of 1872 instated mandatory education for both genders as a cornerstone of the larger nation-building project (Inoue 2006: 42).

Consequently, jogakusei attained a level of public visibility and cultural salience that young women had seldom experienced before, a spectacle to be visually and acoustically consumed by members of the male cultural elite. In the eyes of men of the public sphere, the jogakusei became an embodiment of a burgeoning form of feminine national modernity, a symbol whose signification was to be reified through male-domated discourse:

From the beginning, schoolgirls were public beings, objects of visual consumption who were subject to the distanced and objective male-national gaze. They were to be sighted in public space, particularly in modern space, as iconic figures essential to the new urban landscape, including parks, department stores, museums, zoos, train stations, and downtown streets.

Whatever the social realities and actual experiences of the young women identifying themselves as jogakusei might have been, they were mediated beings, represented in various modern representational genres both visually and textually. (43)

Inoue asserts that this textual representation was achieved through what she calls a metapragmatics of “citation,” by which male intellectuals controlled the signification of the jogakusei by reporting (i.e., citing) their speech in newly centralized print media, constructing metapragmatic indices that defined and contained the jogakusei’s place in the new social landscape.

Male commentators were particularly concerned with the speech of the jogakusei, notable for a suite of non-referential utterance endings such as teyo, noyo, and dawa, to the extent that schoolgirl speech came to be known as teyo-dawa speech (i.e., the utterance endings acquired a first-order indexical value associating: teyo-dawa speech ⇔ modern
schoolgirls). As women’s education became a topic of national public discussion, teyo-dawa speech became iconized (to invoke Irvine and Gal’s (2000) terminology) via citation as a sign of the degeneration of the newly standardized Japanese language, acquiring an nth-order indexical value of vulgarity and transgressive femininity within the discursive space of print media. In her words, such “citational practices amounted ultimately to consolidating the metapragmatic category of schoolgirl speech and thereby belong to a discursive space where male intellectuals produced and contained the knowledge of the schoolgirl” (2006: 39). By displacing teyo-dawa speech via the “tele-technology” of print (49), male commentators participated in “an institutionalized process of dislocating and relocating the text” that transformed a semantically vacuous feature of schoolgirl language from noise to signifier.

Two basic historical conditions had to be met for this metapragmatics of citation to proceed. First, the jogakusei had to attain a level of public visibility so as to be consumable by the public male vision. Second, male intellectuals required a public discursive space—in this case, national print media—within which to contain and iconize teyo-dawa speech by constructing metapragmatic indices around it. By positioning teyo-dawa speech as something merely overheard by the male listener, commentators ascribed an authorial agency to the jogakusei. However, the decontextualization achieved by print allowed teyo-dawa speech to be “stripped of its history and material agency and put on public display, incessantly dislocated, circulated, and subjected to the consuming gaze” (Inoue 2006: 49). Once teyo-dawa citations were re-entextualized within print media, they were subjected to and contained within androcentric metapragmatic narratives that recursively mapped associations of cultural and sexual degeneracy onto the female-associated utterance endings.
III. The discursive space of reddit

Using Silverstein’s ethno-metapragmatics and Inoue’s citational metapragmatics as a starting point, I argue that similar processes of textual displacement and metapragmatic recontextualization take place within the discursive spaces of online platforms such as reddit. Like the discursive space of print media and its role in defining the signification of teyo-dawa speech, I assert that certain cyberspaces act primarily to construct metapragmatic narratives that consolidate the signification of emergent categories of discursive identity. In particular, I am interested in the ways in which the intertextual actions that reddit enables—voting, commenting, submitting, and so on—structure “the logic of semiotic mediation and rationalization” that allows metapragmatic indices to be reified (Inoue 2006: 56). I introduce a neologism, cyber-metapragmatics, to refer to the function played by discursive tools unique to online discourse in the creation of situational meaning. Lastly, while the theory of indexical order asserts that the signification of linguistic usage is subject to constant reinterpretation, I argue that the nature of reddit’s voting system can work to fix and consolidate the nth-order indexical value of overheard discourse, despite the democratic ideals of free expression on which the voting system is based.

A. An introduction to the organizing principles and participatory culture of reddit

To render the rest of my analysis intelligible, I will first provide a brief history and description of reddit.com, paying attention to the intertextual actions that it enables and that distinguish it from print media. Founded in June of 2005 by University of Virginia graduates Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, reddit.com has grown from a notoriously unpolished online bulletin board to a borderline household name as one of the Web’s most popular and influential platforms. According to Alexa Internet, an Amazon-owned web traffic data service, reddit is the fourth-most visited site in the United States and the eighth-most visited
Acquired by Condé Nast Publications in 2006, reddit can be characterized as an aggregation platform, meaning that its intended purpose is the sharing of content—mainstream and radical news articles, YouTube videos, personal photos, links to online stores, image macros, and almost literally anything else one can conceive of—hosted on other sites and platforms, rather than the generation of original content.

As with most aggregation platforms, redditors are not only able to submit posts, but to vote and comment on submissions as well (and vote on comments), a hallmark of the paradigmatic shift from the early Web to the modern Web, what Jenkins (2006) calls “participation culture” and Castells (2009) calls “mass self-communication.” The amount of positive feedback, in the form of positive votes (upvotes) a post receives determines its relative position in the linear queue of posts. Unlike sites like Facebook, MySpace, or LinkedIn—those defined by boyd and Ellison (2008) as Social Network Sites—content on reddit is primarily organized by topic, whereas the identity of the user posting the content is almost always of lesser or negligible importance. reddit users (redditors) cannot post content to reddit at large, but must submit content to a specific subreddit, a user-created forum organized around some subject or premise, from the general (/r/funny, /r/pics, /r/news, /r/sports)\(^4\), to the extremely particular (such as /r/BirdsWithArms, the internet’s first repository dedicated only to Photoshopped images of birds with human arms, or /r/upenn). In certain ways, the subreddit resembles the Goffmanian frame, as it “circumscribes” discourse and becomes crucial to its interpretation (Goffman 1974); the crucial difference is that, on reddit, users are explicitly, consciously and necessarily engaging with the subreddit/frame, going so far as to create new subreddits/frames with predetermined social meanings.\(^5\) As of

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\(^4\) Per reddit convention derived from URL formatting, the /r/- prefix denotes the name of a subreddit, while /u/- denotes a username.

\(^5\) That is not to say that the purpose of a subreddit cannot change over time; for example, the subreddit /r/AskReddit began as a forum for crowdsourcing particular bits of information that might be hard to Google or
May 6, 2016, there are 856,600 subreddits in operation. Users can subscribe to or unsubscribe from subreddits to limit and customize the content that reaches them.

When you navigate to reddit.com, you are directed to the front page (Figure 1), which amalgamates all the subreddits to which a redditor is subscribed; if you log in without signing into an account, the front page will display posts from the 50 “default” subreddits, broadly appealing subreddits (/r/news, /r/funny, and /r/sports, for example) chosen by reddit corporate administrators. Submissions are organized in a linear queue; their rank in the queue is determined by an algorithm that weighs their karma score (circled, along with post rank) against the age of the post, such that a newer post with a lower karma score might appear higher in the queue than an older post with a greater karma score. Note the up and down arrows surrounding the karma score; by clicking these, redditors cast their votes, which get fed into the sorting algorithm. All posts must be given a title (A), which appears in blue text, and posts must be submitted to a specific subreddit, indicated under the post title (B). Lastly, all posts automatically generate an attached comment section, the link to which appears at the bottom of the post information (C).

While comment sections on most websites have acquired a nasty reputation as something to be avoided at all costs, they represent a central part of the reddit experience for many redditors (Massanari, 2015: chapter 1). Indeed, many posts consist only of a title containing some sort of prompt, and a comment section in which redditors discuss the prompt, such as the second-ranked post in the image above.

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6 Since I began writing this paper, reddit’s official metrics site has been discontinued, so updated, official statistics are not available.
7 See https://www.theguardian.com/science/brain-flapping/2014/sep/12/comment-sections-toxic-moderation for an example.
Figure 1: the front page of reddit: (A) Post titles; (B) subreddit labels indexing the particular forum to which a post was submitted

Many subreddits contain only such posts, such as the aptly named /r/AskReddit. Like posts, comments can be voted on and are organized by their karma scores. Below is the comment section from the second-ranked post in Figure 1, whose title poses the question, “What’s the most you’ve seen someone be so out of touch with reality?”:
We will return to the importance of the comment section and its metapragmatic role after first introducing our primary case study, the subreddit /r/TumblrInAction. For now, what is important to understand is that reddit linearly organizes submissions according to a voting algorithm; that all posts must have a title and must be posted to, or contained within, a particular user-created subreddit; and that all posts have an associated comment section.

B. /r/TumblrInAction

Having introduced reddit’s basic structure and forms of participation, I will now discuss a particular subreddit as a case study in cyber-metapragmatics. With 373,680 subscribers as of October 2017, /r/TumblrInAction (TIA) is the 198th-most popular subreddit, in the top .0002% of all subreddits. TIA is one of several subreddits, including /r/The_Donald, /r/TheRedPill, and /r/Incels, that have recently attracted attention for being loci of the virulent misogyny increasingly associated with 4chan, internet culture and the Alt-
Right (Nagle 2017). Nearly all submissions to TIA are screenshots of interactions, images and so on originally posted to Tumblr.com. In other words, TIA is a participatory archive or repository of sorts in which redditors displace texts from one discursive context (Tumblr.com) and re-entextualize them within another.⁸ Tumblr.com is a popular blogging and social media platform that allows users to post multimedia content to their blogs. Its users, often mockingly referred to as tumblrinas, are stereotyped as social justice warriors (SJWs): female, under 30, and erroneously obsessed with identity politics. The first definition of tumbleina on urbandictionary.com⁹ defines the average Tumblr user as “Someone who complains all day on Tumblr about how oppressed they are by men, when 99% of ranting cases were provoked would be meaningless or of utmost minute significance to the average person.”

Like all subreddits, TIA has a sidebar in which the premise and expectations of the subreddit are described. It reads, “Seen a horribly oppressed transethnic otherkin blog their plight? Wept at how terrible it is for the suffering of multiple systems to go unheard every day? Been unable to even live with the thought of the identities of someone's headmates being cisdenied? Then you’ve come to the right place!” Having cherry-picked exaggerated lexical items characteristic of SJW discourse (oppressed, cis-, identities), the author of the sidebar has effaced the original web of indexical meaning in which those words were implicated and recontextualized them within a pejorative metapragmatic frame.

Figure 3 depicts the tenth most popular post on /r/TumblrInAction from May 2016, receiving a karma score of 4992. From the perspective of intertextuality, it is complex: posted by /u/DudeJoe, it consists of a screenshot of a Tumblr post and a comment to that post, also on Tumblr. Thus, the reddit post is decomposable into two interacting texts found on Tumblr. The original Tumblr post is itself composed of three texts: an imagined dialogue

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⁸ For the “culture wars” taking place between Tumblr, reddit and 4chan, see Nagle (2017).
between “them” and “me,” and two images that accompany it. The joke is that someone would pretend to lace someone’s drink (presumably a woman’s) with pills that, in fact, are dinosaur-shaped foam toys that expand in liquid, popular in the 1990s and 2000s. The comment, from an anonymous Tumblr commenter, is expressing a reasonable opinion—that the date rape epidemic should not be the subject of humor—in an unaggressive manner: “i guess this could be funny but why even think of a joke regarding the matter of putting shit in people’s drinks god.” The reddit post’s title, “Because that’s the joke???” posits an imagined response to the rhetorical question posed by the Tumblr user.

![Image of Reddit post](image)

Figure 3. A popular post on /r/TumblrInAction

What is apparently at stake is the parameters for acceptable humor; one side is advocating the accommodation of opinions that express discomfort at formerly acceptable jokes, the other posits that humor is somehow divorced from moral obligation and political consequence, a derivative of the largely misconstrued doctrine of free speech that is exceptionally popular on platforms like reddit.
While my argumentation may, at times, betray my personal politics, my goal is not to argue the legitimacy of a particular political perspective, but rather to trace the metapragmatic logic that structures the discourse cited above. To achieve its effect, we can see that the reddit post (Figure 3) makes use of a number of discursive tools unique to internet-mediated communication. First, it is a two-dimensional “reposted” image, a bit of dislocated discourse akin to the citational practices described by Inoue (2006). The reddit post is an “overheard” post originally from Tumblr, re-contextualized within the subreddit /r/TumblrInAction, which I have argued acts as an explicit metapragmatic frame instructing the viewer how to interpret the text: namely, that it is an icon of the object of ridicule, the tumbrlna/SJW. Further, the image is legitimated as an authentic instantiation of the tumbrlnina by indexing its original source, Tumblr, which acts as an additional metapragmatic frame that informs the interpretation of the text(s). A third frame—perhaps annotation is a better word—is the post title, which designates the appropriate reaction of behalf of the imagined redditor to the post. Lastly, both the post’s rank (10) and karma (4992) act as metapragmatic appendices that legitimate its discourse by invoking the rationalist logic of the democratic vote.

To take another example, Figure 4 shows a second TIA post submitted by /u/Svusoccer55. It is a screenshot of a conversation originally found on Tumblr, whose participants’ names are covered in red. Their conversation describes a hypothetical male-only curfew, and that it would allow them to “wear a pretty dress and walk” at night without fear of violence or harassment. From the perspective of the original participants, it is a conversation “about” the constant sense of vulnerability that women experience at night, to the extent that comfortably wearing a dress after dark would be an emancipating experience; that is to say, its original discursive space indexed a certain set of (feminist) ideologies governing the original metapragmatic function. However, this text has been decontextualized
from its origin, and re-entextualized within a different discursive space whose metapragmatics systematically conflate Tumblr discourse with weakness and illogicality.

Figure 4: A second post on /r/TumblrInAction

The post’s title, “Tumblrina fantasizes about a night without men,” imposes a derogatory social distinction, the tumblrina, onto its participants, whose original usernames have been effaced. Thus, in one cyberspace, the discourse’s nth-order indexical value concerned the hardships of being a woman; once circulated within a different cyber-metapragmatic environment, the original nth-order indexical is ideologically precluded and the text is reinterpretable by means of an “n+1th”-order indexical: a conversation evincing the delusions of its participants, participants who have been lexically categorized under an exogenous title.
In the post’s comment section, other redditors offer tongue-in-cheek discussion of the conversation. The top comment, with a score of 117 reads, “Apparently, the men who break the law to commit rape won't break the law when it comes to a curfew,” implying that the tumblrina’s perspective is founded on naiveté. A second user replied to this comment, but received only 5 points, offering a counterpoint by pointing out the ambiguous criminal status of rape in America: “Rape isn't against the law because the law is made by white cishet males, it is a social construct and part of the patriarchy. What really needs to be done to prevent rape is teaching men not to rape.” The second-highest rated comment in the thread, with 41 karma, reads, “I mean, obviously there are no women that walk around at night in dresses. Nope. None. In the whole western world women are terrified of walking around in dresses at night. Yup. Sure,” similarly dismissing the experiences of the original participants.

As is the case with the submission queue, in the comment section the voting system is at once a textual mediator and a structuring force that assigns some quantity of universal value to a comment, and that subsequently arranges comments according to that value. The 117-5 disparity in karma between the two comments above assigns a much greater worth to the perspective of the initial comment while devaluing the “pro-woman” perspective of the second comment, rationalized by the principles of democratic free speech. While “what Silverstein calls an nth-order usage is always available for reinterpretation” (Eckert 2008: 463), the action of voting undermines the inherent malleability of signification within a given cyberspace. As a discursive space, TIA seeks to contain Tumblr discourse within exactly one set of metapragmatic indices, one that is quintessentially dismissive of feminine and “SJW” discourse. Of course, nothing is categorically stopping anyone from infiltrating TIA with submissions that present an opposing point of view. Nevertheless, any attempt at doing so would be met with a brigade of downvotes that would render such an attempt invisible.

10https://www.reddit.com/r/TumblrInAction/comments/4mnggv/tumblrina_fantasizes_about_a_night_without_men/?d3wt9vl
For a reddit post to be met with positive feedback—and, consequently, to be visible—it must conform to already palatable stances within its subreddit, creating an echo chamber of sorts. Much ink has been spilled in discussions about the tendency of the increasingly fragmented, self-selected audiences that characterize social media to produce “echo chambers” that pummel the already overstimulated user with discourse that reaffirms or panders to their basest prejudices, while effectively shutting out dissenting views. This view, which perhaps underestimates the polysemous nature of communication (Neuman, 2016), is not without a basis in facts of discursive practice in online platforms and “communities” like reddit and Tumblr, even if these facts are rarely discussed in any detail by linguists and anthropologists. While Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and more recent European elections have drawn tremendous attention to the circulation of news and propaganda on Facebook and Twitter, this has largely remained the domain of political scientists, communications/media studies, and other quantitative, computational, and politically-oriented disciplines. My point here is to demonstrate how these kinds of “echo chamber” effects get created at the micro-level, among peers: when practices that are common in everyday speech and in no way unique to online communication—the use of metapragmatic stereotypes in representing samples of “others’” speech — intersect with mechanisms for the presentation (and suppression) of discourse that are in fact unique to the online environment (e.g., the voting system on reddit). In the case of TIA, a subreddit whose modus operandi is the reproduction of a particular social evaluation of a particular type of discourse, the voting system has the effect of consolidating the metapragmatic narratives that frame the samples of Tumblr discourse while obscuring differing narratives. By the internal logic of democratic structures, such structures are meant to yield the most rational, desirable, or relevant choices; nevertheless, I argue that reddit’s voting algorithm actually precludes free expression within certain cyber-metapragmatic environments, as only those posts that invoke popular
metapragmatic framings will be visible in the first place, a consequence of the hegemonic potential of democracy that de Tocqueville recognized nearly two hundred years ago. Put simply, instances of discourse participation that do not reify the link between a type of discourse and a pre-established social significance—that is, discourses that do not function by means of the dominant metapragmatic narrative—are subjected to a process of erasure (Irvine & Gal, 2000) by means of the voting system.

The containment of the signification of Tumblr discourse is sufficiently robust that discourses not originally from Tumblr can become icons of Tumblr discourse, as exemplified in Figure 5 (from Facebook). A fetishistic process of “indexical inversion” has taken place, one that “constructs the very reality that it claims to be representing” (Inoue 2006: 51). Again, note the role of the reddit post title in metapragmatically framing the original discourse. The redditor /u/MiningForMac provides a sort of metapragmatic translation of the discourse from, invoking what he perceives as the \( nth \)-order indexical value of the discourse, i.e., self-obsession.
IV. Conclusion

A. Toward a theory of cyber-metapragmatics

I have argued that the discourse within TIA acts to produce a figuration of personhood (Agha 2010, 2011) associable with certain “biographical scripts” (Blommaert 2017). The *tumblrina* is a character defined in metapragmatic terms via “an institutionalized process of dislocating and relocating the text, or of entextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization,” just like that described by Inoue (2006: 49). By displacing a text from its source, Tumblr, its original contextual meaning is destroyed, allowing redditors to assign a new web of indexical values to the text by means of the ideological intervention of what I call the cyber-metapragmatic function. Unlike the print media described by Inoue, the tele-technologies of reddit are collaborative, and the interactive tools crucial to the “emergent entextualization” of sign forms are without obvious precedent in non-web-based media: subreddits, subreddit sidebars, comment sections, karma scores, and so on. The “most interactive” of these tools is the voting system, which I have argued acts as the engine behind a process of techno-semiotically mediated erasure and social constraint. On the one hand, “participation in discourse involves a continual interpretation of forms in context, an in-the-moment assigning of indexical values to linguistic forms” (Eckert 2008: 463), meaning that indexical value is never fixed but inherently subject to contextual transformation. As such, both subreddits and comment sections could be a crucial participatory sites in the transformation of social meanings associated with perceived discourse categories, as it allows for hundreds of participants to engage in discourse. However, despite the indeterminate ontology of indexical values, the voting system acts to stabilize particular indexical

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11 As a collection of texts, the subreddit could be likened to any sort of journal, publication, anthology, or so on; however, because subreddits are not subject to the expensive material necessities of printing, they can engage with extremely specific or niche themes and perspectives without the need to appeal to a critical threshold of readers.
relationships within subreddits and comment threads by rendering certain narratives invisible while numerically rationalizing the superiority of another set of metapragmatic indices; in the case of politically-oriented subreddits, one could argue that this is their essential function, alongside the distribution of content. That is not to say that there are not similar forms of metapragmatic control in face-to-face talk. However, in the absence of physical violence, participants in spoken discourse are all equally audible regardless of perspective, whereas the voting algorithm tries to make downvoted posts seem as though they do not exist.

Sidebars, post titles, karma scores and comment threads thus become “acts of manufacturing context—producing the social and cultural knowledge that [give] indexical meaning to the given speech form” (Inoue 2006: 56). At the same time, by containing the tumblrina in a state of alterity, and by metapragmatically imposing around it an indexical relationship with weakness, irrationality, and self-obsession, redditors reproduce their own subjectivity in a dialectical relationship to the tumblrina. This is exactly what I mean by cyber-metapragmatics, namely, the forms of discourse participation more or less unique to online discourse—voting, creating subreddits, commenting on threads, etc.—and their relationship to the “ideological intervention” that maps sociocultural meaning onto the contextual usage of sign forms. I chose this particular neologism, cyber-metapragmatics, to establish a direct relationship with the concept of ethno-metapragmatics (Silverstein, 1979; 2003), while distancing it from the notion of “ethnicity” and “culture” suggested by the ethno- prefix. Cyber-metapragmatics does not characterize the metapragmatic logic of a “culture,” but of discursive cyberspaces—be it reddit or Tumblr or /r/TumblrInAction—and it is instantiated by participatory tools and semiotic rationalizations unique to online interaction.
B. Concluding remarks

Thus far, I have primarily concerned myself with discourses about alterity, and with the ways that cyber-metapragmatic environments work to reproduce political narratives, despite the theoretical potential of the internet to transcend normativity in a way that corporatist and statist media cannot. To cast discourse on platforms like reddit simply as an echo chamber for misogynistic, racist and nationalist discourse is, of course, lacking nuance. By flattening the spatio-temporal constraints on human communication, the internet allows proponents of underrepresented or stigmatized discourses to interact, coordinate, and provide solidarity for one another. This technological ability to manufacture highly curated, widely accessible discursive spaces also leads to subreddits dedicated to civil rights, grassroots activism, linguistics, charity work, and so on. But, as we have seen, the ability to makes a discourse genre visible is a double-edged sword, as it becomes vulnerable to exogenous metapragmatic narratives. Even so, institutionalized metapragmatic processes are not impervious to reworking; as Inoue (2006: 69–70) reminds us, features of teyo-dawa speech gradually lost their association with vulgarity and by the 1930s “appeared in the model dialogues of urban middle-class and upper-middle-class women” as “the language of the genuine Japanese woman.” And, as this very paper suggests, just because a forum like TIA exists does not mean that its sole consequence is the advancement of its own agenda, as some people may be inspired to critique it.

Nor is determinism warranted at the synchronic level, as there is a great deal of conscious awareness among many redditors of their discursive environment. Consider the 281st-most popular subreddit, /r/circlejerk, which exists to parody mainstream reddit discourse and praxis, described here by /r/kaosmace:

Pretty much it's a place to make jokes about what's currently trending on reddit and the kind of stuff that makes it to the front page. It's based around the way a lot of the stuff can seem like a big "circle jerk" for karma where everyone just agrees with each other on
stuff like "i like dogs" and "obama is evil for spying on us". Think of it as a satire of reddit. you can only upvote while on there so it's easy karma as well.

So, although I have argued that there are mechanisms of discursive control inherent in the democratic structures of reddit interaction, this control itself becomes the object of metapragmatic narratives in particular corners of reddit. On /r/circlejerk, the playful critique of semiotic and discursive practices of a community becomes a way to express one’s membership in that community, among other things. That participants in a public discourse—even those seemingly most entrenched in its cultural idiosyncrasies—are also producing meta-commentaries about that discourse emphasizes the fractal-recursive nature of language ideology, and cautions against an overly deterministic evaluation of cyber-metapragmatic indices.
REFERENCES


