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Why Do Some Shout and Others Stay Silent? Communication Context Consistency in Political Discourse Offline and on Facebook

CARRIE ANNE PLATT♦
North Dakota State University, USA

DON WAISANEN
Baruch College, City University of New York, USA

JOSÉ MARICHAL
California Lutheran University, USA

Through an open-ended survey of 206 U.S. adults, we investigate how communication context (offline and on Facebook) informs one's willingness to share political opinions. We develop an analytical approach for examining how the stability of or shifts between offline and online messages can provide insights into the discourse environments of social media platforms. Our study uses qualitative analysis to identify and explore (1) self-censorship types, (2) conditions, and (3) tactics specific to online and offline contexts. Our approach helps explain both polarization and self-censorship in political conversations on Facebook. More so, it can provide a way to operationalize and evaluate the environments for political discourse on social media platforms in general.

Keywords: Facebook, political discourse, polarization, self-censorship, context collapse, social media

Much public commentary about online discourse has focused on the potential for unfiltered political opinions to generate conflict, damage relationships, and polarize people (Kalmoe & Mason, 2019). Such outcomes make finding common ground or building consensus on political issues difficult. However, censoring one's political opinions on social media platforms can also threaten public talk, as those with views outside the most prominent positions refrain from adding their perspectives to broader conversations on important issues (Hampton et al., 2014). Why do some people assert their political opinions forcefully on Facebook while others say nothing?

Carrie Anne Platt: carrieanne.platt@ndsu.edu
Don Waisanen: don.waisanen@baruch.cuny.edu
Jose Marichal: marichal@callutheran.edu
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Social media platforms are increasingly becoming toxic spaces for political conversation. A 2021 Pew Survey found that only 9% of social media users surveyed reported "often posting or sharing" political opinions, and only 21% reported "sometimes" discussing politics. The remaining 70% rarely discussed politics or never did so on social media (McClain, 2021). Among the most cited reasons for not discussing politics on social media was the desire among many individuals not to have "things they post or share to be used against them" or to not be "attacked for their views" (McClain, 2021, para. 3). Kalmoe and Mason (2022) found a significant amount of what they call "political victimization" in their survey research; of the one-third of people who reported posting about politics on social media, 64% reported being targeted with political insults, 24% reported being threatened, and most disturbingly, 5% reported being physically attacked.

This disparity in political opinion sharing is amplified on social media by algorithms that reward increased engagement. In 2018, Facebook modified its engagement algorithm to reward what it called meaningful social interactions (MSIs). This change to the algorithm gives increased value to posts that receive significant engagement (comments, likes, and reshares), moving them to the top of Facebook user feeds. In a study of 52 million Facebook users over two months, Hindman, Lubin, and Davis (2022) found that 45% of MSIs came from less than 1% of total users (700,000 of 230 million users). They also found that the most active users were more likely to be White, older, male, and to engage in abusive and misinformative speech.

Several studies have pointed out that the low number of respondents who report discussing politics on social media means that their minority opinion does not tend to be reflected in the population of social media users (Altay, Berriche, & Acerbi, 2023; Saha et al., 2023). Moreover, there are significant social costs inherent in the high levels of political self-censorship on social media platforms. Brady and colleagues (2023) note that people might overperceive the levels of *moral outrage* present in society. They find that this misperception can lead to several antidemocratic impulses, like increasing the social appropriateness of disliking out-groups and an increased acceptance of ideological extremity.

Previous research highlights the prevalence of self-censorship online (McClain, 2021; Peacock & Leavitt, 2016), documents communication tactics used to self-censor (Hayes, 2007; Peacock, 2019; Wu, Xu, & Atkin, 2020), and suggests some factors that make self-censorship more likely (e.g., Hayes, Scheufele, & Huge, 2006; Rui, Cui, & Liu, 2020; Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Gee, 2015). Yet, as Peacock (2019) argues, the two most common theoretical frameworks used to study self-censorship—the spiral of silence and conflict avoidance—do not fully account for how or why people alter their expression of political opinions online. By asking respondents to describe the consistency of their offline and online strategies for political discourse, we offer an additional explanation for why and how some shout and others stay silent on such sites. Through a qualitative, cross-sectional survey, we gathered evidence of shifts in censorship type at the individual level (e.g., moving from partial censorship offline to complete censorship online) along with qualitative data highlighting *why* respondents believe these shifts occur.

We argue that communication context consistency (i.e., examining the stability of or shifts between offline and online messages) can provide insights into the discourse environments of social media platforms. We purposefully use an environmental metaphor to center how message strategies online and offline are

more than mechanistic. When broken down on several levels, an overall picture of the consistency of online and offline messages can indicate which contextual factors and conditions the environment of a social media platform may provide for political discourse. At the same time, the metaphor centers on the different norms, pressures, and connections or disconnections individuals perceive between offline and online environments and the complicated boundaries they must span in an era of digital overload.

Our approach develops and analyzes Facebook's environment for political discourse according to the self-censorship types, conditions, and tactics specific to online and offline contexts. Our argument is supported by evidence showing that (1) individuals tend to shift their censorship type and censorship strategies when they encounter political content on Facebook; (2) individuals are more likely to fully or partially censor their political opinions on Facebook; (3) individuals avoid or limit opinion sharing on Facebook more often than they employ other tactics for managing political discussions; (4) self-censorship on Facebook is forwarded more by political topics than by who the perceived audience is; and (5) individuals who self-censor less on Facebook are more likely to assert their opinion and engage in monologues than use communication strategies such as dialogue.

Communication context consistency can explain the silence of political moderates and the more combative communication strategies employed by those who share their opinion online, accounting for both censorship and polarization. Moreover, our analytical approach provides one way to operationalize and evaluate the grounding for political discourse on social media platforms in general. Before turning to our methods and results, it is critical to look at the features and functions of Facebook that led us to create the categories of self-censorship types, conditions, and communication tactics that inform our analysis of online and offline communication.

Self-Censorship on Facebook

Facebook offers valuable opportunities for studying how people make decisions related to the self-censorship of political opinions. Facebook is the most used social media platform globally, with more than 3 billion accounts (Dixon, 2024). In the United States, nearly 70% of the respondents to a Pew Survey report using the service, which has remained relatively stable since 2016 (Schaeffer, 2024). As a social media platform, Facebook has a unique architecture that allows users to create a known personal profile and maintain connections with various contacts. But the intentional limitations the site offers for segmenting these groups of friends, who come from naturally divided areas of life (friends, family, classmates, coworkers, etc.), makes Facebook a platform characterized by context collapse (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Vitak, 2012; Waisanen, 2015). As the segmentation between discourse spaces dissolves, users learn how to negotiate self-presentation within these collapsing boundaries (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Tracing changes in communication tactics can help us understand how these self-presentations are negotiated against the background of an increasingly polarized political climate.

The factors driving the censorship of political opinions on Facebook are also likely to shift, along with platform affordances and increasing partisanship in the broader cultural climate. Some scholars argue that personality differences can be used to explain the tendency to disclose less in social media spaces. Those who are more inhibited or conflict-avoidant by nature are less likely to share personal information

online (Child, Haridakis, & Petronio, 2012). This research suggests that censorship types would remain consistent across online platforms as well as between offline and online spaces. Other research has found that people self-censor more often online than offline, regardless of platform (Child & Starcher, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Sleeper et al., 2013; Vraga et al., 2015), suggesting that perceptions of online spaces inform self-censorship.

Levels of censorship may also be driven by how users imagine online audiences on Facebook (Goffman, 1959; Litt, 2012). Gil-Lopez et al. (2018) found that users with more extensive and heterogeneous networks modified their presentations by adopting a "lowest common denominator" linguistic style to accommodate the broader range of audience members. Similarly, Su, Suk, and Rojas (2022) found that the expression of controversial political views was primarily driven by the user's imagined audience. Users who imagined their audience as consisting of those who were personally or professionally relevant to them expressed more moderate opinions. Conversely, users who did not imagine their audience as relevant to them were more likely to express polarizing opinions.

Others have found that those who have socially and politically diverse Facebook friend networks are more likely to share information on the platform (Das & Kramer, 2013; Vitak, 2012; Wang, Hmielowski, Hutchens, & Beam, 2017). Davis and Jurgenson (2014) differentiate between *context collision*, where users are made uncomfortable by context collapse and edit themselves accordingly, and *context collusion*, where people use conflict as a means of generating more attention online. Some of the mixed findings in this type of research may result from personal, interpersonal, or platform-based differences or differences in the nature of the information disclosed. For example, Wuestenenk, van Tubergen, and Stark (2023) found that ethnic minority/majority group status significantly impacted whether users expressed controversial opinions. In a study of Dutch social media users, the authors (Wuestenenk et al., 2023) found that members of ethnic minorities in group conversations dominated by ethnic majorities were less likely to express personal opinions or they deviated from their true opinions, whereas the opposite was true of members of ethnic majorities in discussion with ethnic minority members with whom they disagreed.

Qualitative research methods illuminate the contextual factors influencing these communication behaviors. Most of the previous research studies on disclosure strategies employed quantitative surveys to highlight causal relationships between user attributes and network characteristics (see Gil-Lopez et al., 2018; and Zhang, 2022, for exceptions). By asking individuals to explain their approaches in their own words, we can better understand the rich and detailed ways in which users adapt to their personalized network dynamics. As Kim and Ihm (2020) argue, social media users demonstrate "sophisticated strategies to take account of more detailed audience characteristics (i.e., political dispositions, socioeconomic status, personalities or interests that may not be fixed, apparent, nor defined by distinct social categories)" (p. 15).

A growing body of research has examined the variety of proactive and reactive strategies individuals use to avoid political discussions on social media platforms, calling for further research into the "decision-making process shaping opinion expression" (Wu et al., 2020, p. 1723), the "intent behind non-participation" online (Sakariassen & Meijer, 2021, p. 4), and how "citizens navigate political content in this complex social space" (Vraga et al., 2015, p. 286). Our study extends research in this area by offering a view of the online and offline strategies and tactics people use to navigate these parts of their lives. Different

from previous work finding that communication on social networking sites reflects an individual's offline strategies (Gearhart & Zhang, 2014), we contextualize these strategies by seeking to explain how and why disclosure management differs between online and offline contexts. In the following sections, we detail our methods of data collection, framework for data analysis, and results. We conclude by discussing the scholarly and practical implications of our findings.

Methods

We undertook an exploratory research design that included collecting and analyzing semi-structured interviews of Facebook users and their management of political conversations on- and offline. Exploratory designs are helpful for generating theoretical propositions grounded in the data, which can then be tested as hypotheses in future research. We recruited a sample of Facebook users, via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform, to answer a series of survey questions administered over Qualtrics.[1] We followed Curdy's (2014) and Sheehan and Pittman's (2016) advice for administering and collecting data with these two platforms. To qualify for compensation, respondents had to pass two attention checks while completing the survey. We limited our sample to those 18 years or older, living in the United States, and actively using Facebook. We asked participants to respond to each question in detail: "Please write at least one paragraph describing and explaining your answer to the best of your knowledge." We collected responses from 206 people. Their ages ranged from 19 to 75 years, with an average age of 36.1. The sample was predominantly White (80.6%; with 7.35% Asian, 7.3% Black, 4.4% Hispanic, and 0.4% undisclosed) and evenly distributed between women (53.9%) and men (46.1%). Roughly half of the respondents had a college degree (52%), 42.2% had only a high school diploma, and 5.8% had a graduate degree.

We analyzed responses to the following questions: (1) "How much do you tend to censor your true opinions about politics or controversial issues on Facebook, if at all? Please describe a personal example that illustrates your answer"; and (2) "How much do you tend to censor your true opinions about politics or controversial issues when you're offline (i.e., in face-to-face interactions with people)? Please describe an example that illustrates your answer." To keep our assumptions about how individuals navigated such contexts in check, we kept their terms and constructions primary as a unit of analysis (see Alcoff, 1991). Following qualitative research principles, we privileged what respondents identified as a representative example of their approach to self-censorship rather than attempting to catalog all the communication tactics a respondent used across the various communication contexts in their life.

The open-ended data revealed the ways in which self-censorship played out across different spaces. By making the questions open-ended and asking for examples, we generated responses that (1) explored

[1] Sheehan and Pittman (2016), authors of the most comprehensive academic work to date on the use of MTurk for research, encourage researchers "to pay minimum wage . . . for HITs [Human Intelligence Tasks]" (p. 9) and to "use Qualtrics or SurveyMonkey to collect responses instead of MTurk itself" (p. 44). Following these recommendations, we set up a project as a "Requester" on MTurk and set the assignment to expire within three days. Respondents who completed the survey on Qualtrics received a code they could enter for payment via the MTurk interface. We used New York's minimum wage standard to compensate respondents for their time.

differences between how individuals approach political communication on Facebook and offline and (2) illuminated how tactics might change based on specific elements of the online or offline context (e.g., Facebook groups vs. the more public feed; conversations with coworkers at work vs. conversations with coworkers over drinks after work). Each step of the way, we hewed closely to respondents' perceptions of how political communication shifted (or did not shift) across different contexts and audiences.

Data Analysis

To facilitate our theory building, we built a codebook based on the censorship types, censorship conditions, and communication tactics that emerged from our initial analysis and used this framework to code the data set in its entirety. This approach helped us account for the richness of context present in our qualitative data (validity) while increasing the consistency of coding (reliability) across hundreds of open-ended responses. It also allowed us to assess consistency through the calculation of intercoder agreement.

Beginning with a randomly selected subset of respondents (n = 50), we identified communication tactics used to share, obscure, or conceal political opinions and conditions informing the selection of each tactic. *Communication tactics* represent the strategies individuals use to share, limit, or avoid sharing their true opinions. These tactics are defined in Table 1.

Table 1. Communication Tactics Used.

Tactic
Assert: Make declarations
Attribute: Name or label others
Avoid: Do not share anything
Block: Prevent others from seeing posts
Debate: Exchange different viewpoints to convince others your view is correct
Dialogue: Exchange different viewpoints to understand the issue better
Disengage: Leave the conversation
Divert: Change the subject
False agreement: Indicate assent to avoid conflict
Limit: Limit length, amount, or intensity of opinion
Listen/Learn: Ask questions about others' positions
Only if asked: Share only if asked directly
Strategic ambiguity: Be purposefully vague
Suss out: Determine the other person's stance on the issue before sharing one's own opinion
Tailor/Segment: Alter opinion based on audience
Visual display: Use clothing or images to communicate views

After establishing the range of communication tactics, we coded our data for the contextual factors that informed communication choices. For *censorship conditions*, we found that censorship was prompted by the audience (*who*), topic (*what*), location (*where*), or time (*when*). To account for the overlap between

the *who* and *where* conditions, we used the code *where* for references to specific physical locations or platforms and *who* for references to particular audiences. For example, someone may refrain from discussing politics while at work but talk about politics with coworkers outside the workplace. This instance would be coded as self-censorship based on *where*.

The last phase of inductive analysis classified respondents into three *censorship types*. This classification was based on the extent to which they concealed their true political opinions: full censor (did not share beliefs), partial censor (limited what, to whom, where, or when they shared), or never censor (shared true beliefs). Respondents could demonstrate the same censorship type across contexts (e.g., never censor either offline and on Facebook) or different censorship types across contexts (e.g., partial censor offline and never censor on Facebook).

For the deductive phase of our analysis, we followed the procedures for establishing an intercoder agreement in qualitative content analysis outlined by Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, and Pedersen (2013). This approach uses the standard model of working toward a "negotiated agreement" through multiple rounds of coding, reconciling disagreements, and refining codes while recognizing differences in knowledge among the coders. Here, the first author served as the primary coder, and a graduate research assistant served as the secondary coder. We calculated intercoder agreement based on the level of agreement between the coders and the percentage of deferral to the primary coder, who should be more accurate in their assignment of codes owing to their greater involvement in code development. Our final measures of intercoder agreement indicate acceptable levels of reliability in coding: There was 84.5% agreement initially and 99% agreement after reconciliation, with 57.5% of the disagreements resolved in line with the primary coder's assessment.

After the responses were coded, we used pattern coding (Saldaña, 2021) to look for relationships in the data. We explored how censorship conditions corresponded with censorship types, how communicative strategies varied by censorship condition, and how communication strategies were distributed across the various combinations of censorship types and censorship conditions. To answer our research question, we focused on how individuals' censorship types, conditions, and communication tactics changed between their online and offline examples.

Results

With every respondent reporting both their Facebook and offline self-censorship behaviors, we determined that more people changed their censorship type across online and offline contexts (61.2%) than remained consistent (36.9%; 1.9% could not be determined based on responses). The three censorship types were evenly distributed among the respondents who reported no change: partial censor (36.8%), full censor (32.9%), and never censor (30.3%). We also tracked how conditions for censorship and communication tactics changed depending on the context. These findings add to what can be learned from aggregate frequency counts by showing changes at the level of individuals' communicative behavior. See tables in Appendix A for quantitative data supporting the following qualitative themes.

In addition to the social cost and conflict concerns identified in previous research, the evidence from these analyses supports the idea that the perceived futility of discussion on Facebook explains why people change their political communication behaviors online. Survey responses demonstrated the following: most individuals tend to shift their censorship type or tactics when they encounter political content on Facebook, are more likely to censor their political opinions on Facebook, and use avoidance more often than other strategies on Facebook. Individuals also enact silence more in response to political topics than perceptions of who the audience may be, and those who never censor online are more likely to assert their position than engage in dialogue or debate. We present the evidence for each theme below.

Theme 1: Individuals Tend to Shift Their Offline Censorship Type and Communication Tactics When They Encounter Political Content on Facebook

Our data show that Facebook often prompted a change in censorship type (full censor, partial censor, or never censor) and almost always prompted a change in communication tactics. Almost two-thirds of respondents changed types between the online and offline contexts, with the majority shifting toward greater censorship on Facebook. The one-third of participants who did not change their censorship type still tended to change their communication tactics when moving between the two contexts. Consistent full censors' primary online tactic was to *avoid* conversations about political or controversial issues. Their offline tactics included *divert*, *limit*, *disengage*, and *false agreement*. For consistent partial censors, *limit* appeared slightly more frequently than other communication tactics for online conversations, while *avoid* was more common in offline contexts.

Examples provided by consistent full censors show this change in tactics. Avoiding political conversation in the offline context required a range of tactics to contend with the norms and constraints of offline conversations. Many reported using *diversion*: "He tends to bring these things up just to get a response from me or my husband but instead of engaging in it, we just smile and change the subject." Others found a way to leave the physical space (*disengagement*):

> I just made a noise like *hmmm* and didn't say anything, and quickly made an excuse to go to a different station, even though I was really offended by what she said, and I think that someone with those views shouldn't be in charge of a business.

False agreement was sometimes used when respondents encountered someone with opposing political opinions:

> If they are expressing opinions that are similar to my own then yes I speak up and usually don't hold back. On the other hand, if I am with someone that has an opinion that is different than my own I am usually just quiet and say a lot of uh huh and just smile and nod.

It was easier—and more likely—for consistent full censors to avoid political discussion on Facebook by not posting political content or responding to political posts and comments.

Consistent never censors reported engaging in more *debate* or *dialogue* when offline (21.7% total vs. 4.3% online). Descriptions of offline conversations emphasized the two-way exchange of opinions: This change in tactic may reflect a difference between a broadcast approach to social media postings versus a two-way exchange of face-to-face conversation.

Theme 2: Individuals Are More Likely to Censor Their Opinions When They Encounter Political Content on Facebook Than in Offline Contexts

Full or partial censorship of political opinion was more common on Facebook, with 55.3% of respondents indicating that they avoided sharing any political opinion online (full censor). An additional 24.3% indicated that they limited how much of their political opinion they shared online (partial censor). Many participants referenced the affordances of the Facebook platform as something that enabled them to control how much of their political opinion they shared and with whom they shared their opinions:

> The only time I censor is when it is with someone that I feel is not worth the time or is someone I do not want to create a rift with, then I usually just ignore their comments or block them from my posts.

The remaining 19.4% reported never censoring their opinions online.

Respondents were less likely to censor themselves in offline settings, with only 18% indicating they did not share any of their political beliefs offline (full censor) and 52.4% limiting how much they shared their opinions (partial censor). Partial censorship in the offline context often involved participants sharing *only if asked* or taking time to *suss out* others' political opinions before sharing any of their own beliefs. Some participants had personal policies regarding when—and with whom—they would engage in political conversations: "I only discuss political issues with my immediate family when somebody asks me. I never initiate such conversations." When reflecting on the offline context, 28.6% of the participants reported never censoring themselves. In response to how much they tended to censor their true political opinions, a never-censor participant said, "I don't. I wear my red MAGA [Make America Great Again] hat a lot and I get lots of love and just a few jeers or side looks."

Those who reported changing censorship type between offline and online contexts were more likely to report greater self-censorship online. The most common change was moving from partial censor offline to full censor online (53.2%), while the least common change was moving from full censor offline to never censor online (2.4%). Additionally, more respondents moved from never censor offline to full censor online (17.5%) than from full censor offline to never censor online (2.4%).

Theme 3: Individuals Avoid or Limit Opinion Sharing on Facebook More Often Than They Employ Other Tactics for Managing Political Discussions

The 55.3% of respondents who identified as full censors online almost always used *avoid* as their primary communication tactic (94.7%), refusing to post political content or choosing to scroll past political posts without comments or reacting. Offline full censors used a greater variety of communication tactics to

obscure their opinions, likely because it was harder to avoid political topics in face-to-face conversations. Thus, the communication tactics of *disengage*, *divert*, *false agreement*, and *limit* were used more often offline than online.

Partial censors kept themselves from getting involved in political conversations online by *limiting* how much of their opinion they shared (52%) or *avoiding* conversations on a particular topic (18%). This approach was often framed as being mindful of one's audience:

> I don't hide my feelings. I am just careful as to how I say things so I don't hurt anyone's feelings or disrespect them. One day there was a lot of back and forth on Trump and Hillary. I just said thank god I live in America where I can voice my opinions. God bless America.

Those who identified as partial censors would also *tailor/segment* their opinion based on the audience or engage in *strategic ambiguity*, posting something that would only be recognized as a political statement by others with similar beliefs:

> When I talked about the election last year, for example, I just posted a video that was about how sometimes politicians can trick voters into supporting them by promising them things that seem nice but are actually bad for them [. . . .] I knew only a few people were gonna watch the video and they were probably friends who already agreed with the sentiment.

Another respondent highlighted how online affordances could be used for strategic ambiguity:

> I linked to the Wikipedia article on the Boston Tea Party with no other text or info. I was doing this to show a little bit of support for the NFL [National Football League] players who kneeled during the national anthem and to point out that protesting was part of the very basis our country was founded on. Of course, doing it that way it was purposely difficult for people to even figure that out from just the link to the Wikipedia article.

These strategies kept partial censors from being drawn into conversations with those who had differing opinions.

Those who changed their censorship type illustrate how communication tactics shift toward silence in the face of political talk on Facebook. Looking at those who shifted from partial censor offline to full censor online (accounting for roughly half of our sample), we see their communication tactics change from a large variety of offline tactics, based on the specific person or people they were interacting with, to primarily *avoid* online (89.6% of cases). When it came to more radical changes, those who moved from never censor offline to full censor online enjoyed asserting their opinion, engaging in debate or dialogue, or listening/learning in face-to-face conversations, but almost always avoided talk of politics online (95.5% of instances). The examples of listening/learning offline emphasized the value of considering others' views.

> When I'm talking with my boyfriend's mother I will just listen to what she's saying about how she feels and her views, and this is just what I do with everyone I talk with. I'll ask them why they voted for a person and the pros and cons of doing so.

Nevertheless, most individuals in this group avoided sharing their views on Facebook: "I don't post, comment, like or share anything that is political or what is deemed controversial on FB at all."

Theme 4: Political Topics Forward Self-Censorship on Facebook More Than the Perceived Audience

Looking at the conditions that respondents identified as prompting self-censorship on Facebook, we see a heavy emphasis on politics as a distinct genre of online discussion. On Facebook, the full-censor type corresponded most often with the censorship condition of *what* (92.1%), indicating that individuals chose to conceal their opinions more in response to specific topics than concerns about *where* they were posting (5.3%) or *who* they perceived to be reading their posts or comments (2.6%). These respondents opted to hide their opinions when they encountered something they deemed "controversial" or anything related to "politics." In line with the political polarization and fallout surrounding the 2016 election, full censors also refrained from discussing President Donald Trump and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in online spaces.

Partial censorship corresponded with different censorship conditions in the Facebook and offline contexts. Partial censorship online also corresponded most strongly with the *what* condition (88%), with respondents limiting how much of their opinion they shared relative to particular topics. This contrasts with the full censors, who indicated that they avoided discussing any political or controversial topic. Partial censors were more likely to identify specific topics that prompted them to limit how much they would share: Gun control, abortion, and President Trump were the topics most frequently mentioned. Participants cited the likelihood of posts on these topics inciting unproductive arguments as their rationale for partial censorship:

> I hate arguing with people. For example, a vast majority of the people on my friend's list have differing opinions on gun control. I've been completely avoiding the topic because I've seen how disgusting people can be to each other for having differing opinions.

Offline, partial censorship depended primarily on *who* one was talking to (63%), followed by *what* they were talking about (23.1%), and *where* they were having the conversation (13.9%).

Individuals who moved from partial censorship offline to full censorship online tended to censor themselves primarily in response to *what* was being discussed online (89.6% of cases), such as avoiding conversations about the president. Their partial censorship offline tended to be in response to *who* they were interacting with (70.1% of cases), such as avoiding political conversations with certain relatives or sharing their true opinions only after they had determined that the other person shared their politics: "Last time someone at work brought up a political subject, I just asked a couple of neutral questions to figure out his opinion, so I could decide whether it was worth continuing or just changing the subject." The most common change was toward full censorship online, and the most common communication tactics used online

were to limit opinion sharing or avoid politics entirely. Individuals who reported never censoring their political opinions also provided evidence that low perceived utility influences online political talk.

Theme 5: Those Who Self-Censor Less Often Are More Likely to Assert Their Opinions and Less Likely to Use Strategies Associated With Discussion on Facebook Than in Offline Contexts

While multiple communication tactics were associated with the never censor type—including *assert*, *debate*, and *dialogue*—the respondents who reported that they did not censor themselves on Facebook primarily chose to *assert* their positions (92.5%). As one respondent said, "Sometimes they don't like my opinion, but you know what? I stand up for what I believe in when it comes to that situation. I don't care if they like it or not." While those who said they never censored their political opinions offline used *assert* as their most frequent communication tactic, they reported more instances of *debate* and *dialogue* in offline conversations than in the online context.

In providing reasons for their censorship approach, respondents often expressed the belief that there was little point in talking about politics online either because they believed people were likely to become entrenched in their opinions (e.g., "I do this for my own well-being, emotionally, and truthFull [*sic*], I doubt that my comments will change anyone's mind, as their comments don't change my mind"; "very few people will be convinced") or because they saw the lack of nonverbal communication as making misunderstanding more likely ("I think it's easier to be understood and not misunderstood face to face"). Consequently, for never censors, asserting a political opinion may be more about expressing their political identity and less about persuading others or engaging in productive deliberation on public issues.

Discussion

While previous research has explored censorship tactics, the analytical approach provided in this study allowed us to track changes in online and offline self-censorship behaviors at the individual level, along with respondents' explanations for those changes, creating a thick explanation for the myriad ways individuals shift their communication tactics when interacting with others on Facebook. Our findings have several implications for social media scholarship and public discussion.

First, if replicated for other platforms, our approach of threading together self-censorship type, conditions, and tactics can serve as a valuable baseline for determining a site's environment for political discourse. For instance, there has been a mass migration of users from Twitter to the federated network Mastodon. The structure of federated networks allows individual communities (called instances) to set their own rules for discourse. Although there has been little empirical research on this question, a federated structure can potentially create a better discourse environment. By looking at respondents' messages and strategies, our analytical approach could provide some empirical insight into whether or not this is the case.

Second, at least from our data, it appears that users recognize that they must span two distinctly different discourse environments and employ a range of discourse management strategies. While a little more than one-third of respondents maintained consistency, the majority reported differences in their online and offline disclosure strategies. While users reported selectively sharing political information in the offline

context (based on whom they were talking to and what they were talking about), they were more likely to avoid discussing politics online. The predominance of "topic" over "audience" as reasons for self-censorship challenges previous findings that attribute self-censorship to context collapse. These findings are more consistent with Hayes (2007), who found that some topics prompted self-censorship "independent of the climate of opinion" (p. 785). The small minority who were more likely to share political opinions online were also more likely to assert these opinions.

Consistent with Peacock (2019), avoidance was not the only tactic used to self-censor. Many of our respondents masked their political opinions by pretending to agree, engaging in strategic ambiguity, and limiting how much they said. Those who reported never censoring their opinions online were more likely to assert their positions than engage in dialogue or ask questions. Self-censorship was less common in offline spaces, more likely to be context dependent, and accomplished using a broader range of communication tactics. For instance, those who reported never censoring themselves offline were more likely to engage in dialogue or questioning rather than just asserting their opinions. This work adds to recent questioning of an assumption that cross-cutting discussion on social media benefits democratic health (Peacock, 2021). Mutz (2002) found that social networks that cut across different ideologies foster greater tolerance for opposing views. At the very least, exposure to heterogeneous networks of people tends to increase political knowledge (Kim, Lu, & Lee, 2021). However, our framework shows that Facebook's structure is not amenable to cross-cutting political discussion, similar to how Kim, Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler (2021) found frequent Facebook commenters had more polarized opinions and used more toxic language than commenters on other social media.

Third, the prevalence of self-censorship online may have consequences when it comes to the impact of social media on one's willingness to take political action. Individuals rely on sites like Facebook to assess political opinions and social norms across a more comprehensive network than they can access through in-person interactions. Settle (2018) found that the nature of Facebook's newsfeed allows for a passive transmission of political opinion that encourages users to infer other users' political views rather than engage in dialogue to gain a fuller understanding. If large percentages of users refrain from sharing their opinions, and those who do share tend toward more combative communicative tactics, "public opinion" on political issues may appear more polarized than it is. Consequently, users who do not censor themselves online are likely to have a disproportionate impact on perceived norms, leading to further repression of opinion through self-censorship.

For example, public opinion on climate change is frequently seen as divided between those who believe in human-caused climate change and climate-change deniers. But researchers have documented half a dozen positions on climate change, with true "deniers" significantly outnumbered by the other positions (Grant, 2021). Surfacing these different positions can spur changes in climate policy and other important issues because individuals' willingness to engage in social change depends mainly on how they believe others view the situation (Centola, 2021). Consequently, the study of online self-censorship has implications for anyone seeking to encourage such changes through online conversations. Our findings build on previous experimental research documenting how the *exemplar effect* of vocal users might prompt self-censorship (Zerback & Fawzi, 2017).

If a sizable majority of users opt out of or mask their opinions in political discussions, what remains are those who "never censor." We found evidence of both context collapse (where self-editing reigns) and context collusion (where conflict-driven approaches surface) in our data (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). More work could be done on the characteristics of the never-censor type. Are they individuals with strong political opinions who are not interested in debate but only post to reinforce their political identity? Is "worldview maintenance" the primary purpose of their political communication? If so, they may be drawn to an online environment that emphasizes identity maintenance over deliberative discourse (Marichal, 2012). Our efforts may be better spent encouraging partial and full censors to share their views.

Last, although we forward the idea that Facebook does not provide a productive environment for political discourse, our analytical approach can be used to determine the *degrees* to which such conclusions might be reached. Sakariassen and Meijer (2021) argue that concepts like self-censorship and inhibition have been unfairly framed as pejorative because audiences are actively involved and negotiate strategies that collapse the boundaries between participation and nonparticipation. They note that different audiences exert various thresholds of presence, engage in identity management, navigate social discomfort, and use a risk analysis on social platforms like Facebook that should not be reduced to strict bifurcations between passive and active participation. Indeed, users do not simply disengage but manage their participation by limiting their discourse, prioritizing the *what* over the *who*, and diverting from topics at hand, among other strategies. However, the tactics used might still be seen on a continuum, where more democratic forms of communication are used more often offline.

The use of a convenience sample to collect data and the focus on one specific platform (Facebook) limits the generalizability of our study. For example, most respondents in this study were White. Future research could explore the influence of demographics, cultural differences, or technological affordances on censorship patterns. It is also worth recognizing that Facebook's largely asynchronous nature encourages users to share content as a form of connection. This structure is not always the same across all platforms. However, the presence of "like" buttons and threaded comments makes it possible to transfer our analytic framework to other platforms.

We hope that future work on self-censoring strategies addresses how individual choices are impacted by larger societal forces (e.g., how are strategies to censor/partially censor/not censor impacted by cultural characteristics like race, age, gender, religion, geographic region, or income level?). An additional consideration would be whether censorship strategies are temporally dependent. Would self-censorship strategies change as the proximity to a major election increases? These areas for future research suggest broader questions about an individual's sense of political obligation. Namely, are those with a greater sense of civic obligation more likely to engage in political discourse than those with a "thinner" version of citizen obligation in a democratic society?

An additional line of inquiry would be to examine the varying strategies for improving the discursive health of online spaces. While the use of artificial intelligence and large language models is fraught with environmental, social, and ethical concerns, it is worth experimenting with alternative approaches to reduce toxic speech on platforms. We are particularly interested in how platforms can strike a balance between free expression and creating an inclusive discourse environment. Our work gives researchers in this area a novel metric to use as a dependent variable in their analysis. Platform interventions using machine-learning

strategies can use a change in the rate of self-censoring strategy adoption as one metric to determine whether or not they are creating healthy civic discourse environments.

The environments of social media platforms can promote or thwart political conversation. If their contextual factors and conditions create the perception that it is pointless to talk about politics online, we are left with cultures of censorship and assertions, which leave little room for democratic possibilities. Helberger (2019) highlights different models of democracy. She notes that each approach demands different normative criteria for productive democratic discourse (Helberger, 2019). For example, under liberal democratic theory models, what matters is the freedom to access the content one wishes without interference from the state. In the participatory model, what matters is that all users be given access to participate. Yet our analytical approach connects most with a deliberative model, primarily because we view the health of the discourse environment as an essential feature that undergirds all other aspects of democratic discourse (e.g., access to diverse, uncoerced views). By continuing to operationalize self-censorship types, conditions, and tactics specific to online and offline contexts, we have provided one approach for seeing how a discourse environment impacts users' ability to be critical, including their freedom to participate in discourse and access a diverse set of views on issues. Addressing such issues will remain vital to developing futures where people can come together, both online and offline, to address shared concerns and problems.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Distribution of Censor Type, Conditions, and Tactics Online.

Censor Type	Based On		Communication Tactics Used	
Full (n = 114) 55.3%	What	92.1%	Avoid	94.7%
	Where	5.3%	Divert	0.9%
	Who	2.6%	False agreement	0.9%
			Humor	0.9%
			Only if asked	0.9%
			Listen/Learn	0.9%
			Strategic ambiguity	0.9%
Partial (n = 50) 24.3%	What	88%	Limit	52%
	Who	6%	Avoid	18%
	Where	6%	Strategic ambiguity	8%
			Tailor/Segment	8%
			Listen/Learn	4%
			Only if asked	2%
			Block	2%
			Humor	2%
			Visual display	2%
Never (n = 40) 19.4%	NA		Assert	92.5%
			Debate	2.5%
			Dialogue	2.5%
			Visual display	2.5%
Could not be determined (n = 2) 1%	NA		NA	

Table A2. Distribution of Censor Type, Conditions, and Tactics Offline.

Censor Type	Based On		Communication Tactics Used	
Full (n = 37) 18.0%	What	83.8%	Avoid	64.9%
	Who	13.5%	Divert	16.2%
	Where	2.7%	Limit	10.8%
			False agreement	5.4%
			Disengage	2.7%
Partial (n = 108) 52.4%	Who	63%	Avoid	35.2%
	What	23.1%	Tailor/Segment	16.7%
	Where	13.9%	Limit	8.3%
	Unknown	1%	False agreement	7.4%
			Only if asked	7.4%
			Listen/Learn	5.6%
			Suss out	5.6%
			Dialogue	4.6%
			Disengage	3.7%
			Divert	3.7%
			Debate	1%
			Strategic ambiguity	1%
			Unknown	1%
Never (n = 59) 28.6%	NA		Assert	57.6%
			Dialogue	15.3%
			Debate	13.6%
			Attribute	1.7%
			Humor	1.7%
Could not be determined (n = 2) 1%	NA		NA	

Table A3. Change in Censorship Type Between Online and Offline Contexts.

Offline Censor	Online Censor	Percentage Changed (n = 126)	Censor Based on (Offline)		Primary Offline Tactics		Censor Based on (Online)		Primary Online Tactics	
Partial	Full	53.2%	Who	70.1%	Avoid	32.8%	What	89.6%	Avoid	89.6%
			What	22.4%	Tailor/Segment	17.9%	Where	5.9%		
			Where	7.5%	Debate/Dialogue	9%	Who	4.5%		
Never	Full	17.5%	NA		Assert	45.5%	What	95.5%	Avoid	95.5%
					Debate/Dialogue	31.8%	Where	4.5%		
					Listen/Learn	4.5%				
Never	Partial	10.3%	NA		Assert	69.2%	What	92.3%	Limit	84.6%
					Debate/Dialogue	30.8%	Who	7.7%	Avoid	15.4%
Partial	Never	10.3%	Who	46.2%	Avoid	53.8%	NA		Assert	92.30%
			Where	30.8%	Tailor/Segment	15.4%			Debate/Dialogue	7.70%
			What	23%						
Full	Partial	6.3%	What	62.5%	Avoid	75%	What	75%	Limit	37.5%
			Who	37.5%			Where	12.5%	Avoid	25%
							Who	12.5%	Strategic ambiguity	25%
Full	Never	2.4%	What	66.70%	Avoid	66.7%	NA		Assert	100%
			Where	33.30%	Limit	33.3%				

Table A4. No Change in Censorship Type Between Online and Offline Contexts.

Offline Censor	Online Censor	Percentage of Consistent (n = 76)	Censor Based on (Offline)		Primary Offline Tactics		Censor Based on (Online)		Primary Online Tactics	
Partial	Partial	36.8%	Who	53.6%	Avoid	32.1%	What	89.3%	Limit	42.9%
			What	25%	False agreement	14.3%	Who	7.1%	Avoid	17.9%
			Where	21.4%	Tailor/Segment	14.3%	Where	3.6%	Tailor/Segment	10.7%
Full	Full	32.9%	What	92%	Avoid	60%	What	100%	Avoid	96%
			Who	8%	Divert	20%			Listen/Learn	4%
					Limit	12%				
Never	Never	30.3%	NA		Assert	65.2%	NA		Assert	91.3%
					Debate/Dialogue	21.7%			Debate/Dialogue	4.3%
									Visual display	4.3%