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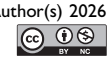

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Civilizing users through social media corporate curricula

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Abstract

The psychological, political and social risks of social media are commonly up for debate. In response, social media companies are producing free to access lesson plans, tool-kits, and other pedagogical materials that seek to educate users about responsible social media use. Through a document analysis of such resources released by Meta, including Facebook's Get Digital literacy campaign and Instagram's Community Programs and Guides, we show how the social media corporate curriculum invites learners to interpret, discuss, and act upon the problems of social media as if they were an individual issue. We argue that this not only entrenches neoliberalized values of personal resilience but also functions, following Norbert Elias, to civilize the user through the cultivation of manners, morals, and codes of digital conduct. We close by highlighting the contingency of such an arrangement, offering alternative pedagogical approaches that do not reproduce these universalizing effects.

Keywords

civilization, corporate social responsibility, digital literacy, habits, manners, Meta, neoliberalism, problematization, social media, well-being

Introduction

That social media, as well as the companies that create and maintain them, have raised many problems, on many scales, is commonly understood. So is the idea that the nature of these problems are contested. Social media undermines the efficacy of the public

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sphere, one might claim, in contrast to another who could argue it provides a new vehicle for democratic communication; social media is something that enables toxic abuse by anonymous strangers, or offers the chance to meaningfully connect with friends and family; leads to psychological harm through negative social comparisons, or a path to better community belonging; is a commercial vehicle of data-colonization, or dissolves global digital divides; enables exploitative regimes of capitalist value extraction, or facilitates commerce and entrepreneurship. While such problems have been empirically studied in some depth, with everyday users likewise aware of the ambivalent forces generated by their personal engagements with platforms (Gibson et al., 2024), critical scholarship is increasingly turning its attention to how social media companies themselves are seeking to frame their meaning and scope in the world today (Christin et al., 2024; Scharlach, 2024). In doing so, how the problems of social media are discursively constructed and practically administered, who is said to be responsible, and with what effects is now a productive line of interdisciplinary inquiry (Gillespie, 2023).

This article contributes to this emerging field, but more directly follows thinkers in the continental tradition to analyse how the stated problems of social media 'occur in the historical production of an actual world' (Savransky, 2021: 17). We proceed with the insight that the way the problems of social media are expressed, along with their solutions, reveal as much about the ambient political contexts they are situated within, and those who are articulating them, as they do about the specifics of the things they ostensibly address (Wu, 2022). Following Deleuze, via his readings of Foucault, we suggest that problematizations of social media are produced through and delineate 'practices of seeing and speaking' (Deleuze, 1988: 119), which serve as a limit to how individuals and groups interpret the particular issues and events they concern. For this article, we explore the question of how social media companies are problematizing the various controversies surrounding their services by examining the boundaries they impose: What becomes visible through the way these problems are composed? And how are we invited to think, discuss, and act upon them in turn?

To approach these questions, we will empirically examine a previously underexplored domain where social media companies directly construct and address the potential problems that arise through use of their services: the *social media corporate curriculum*. Comprising free lesson plans, classroom discussion points, tool-kits, information videos, guides, and interactive media, such resources are offered by technology companies, including Meta, Google, and TikTok, for public educators and caregivers to use in schools and at home, respectively. These materials aim to teach youth how to use social media responsibly, in order to avoid its possibly problematic outcomes. We focus on Meta's social media corporate curriculum, employing a case study of Facebook's Get Digital digital literacy materials, and Instagram's Community Programs and associated guides, which provide training in habitual styles of conscious, authentic, and resilient use.

The opening section of this article will frame Meta's educational interventions as a performative practice of corporate social responsibility (CSR), examining the ways in which corporate curricula produced by multinational companies seek to shape how present consumers and future generations interpret, view, and speak about their potentially

problematic business operations (Banerjee, 2008). Using a case-study approach, which, as we detail below, is grounded in a style of practice-oriented document analysis (Asdal and Reinertsen, 2022), we will then show how Meta's globalized pedagogical materials aim to inculcate healthy habits in users. This has the effect of individualizing the psychological, social and political problems associated with platforms, diminishing the extractive capitalist operations or designs of platforms themselves as potentially contributing factors in their manifestation, while ensuring their continued (profitable) presence in users' lives (Fuchs, 2015). We will show how the implicit values contained within this individualized stance entrench the responsibilized, neoliberalized values of the present day, chiming with similar arguments made elsewhere in the scholarship on social media's political resonances at large (Enli and Fast, 2023). However, based on our novel empirical analysis, we will then argue that the problematizations found within Meta's social media corporate curriculum more fundamentally function within a longer historical process of socio-political normalization identified by Norbert Elias (2000) in his examination of the *civilizing process* (Hallinan, 2021; van Krieken, 2024). We argue that by encouraging people, and the young especially, to educate themselves to become better, healthier, more conscious social media users, Meta's social media corporate curriculum functions to *civilize the user* in ways that are aligned with, but not wholly reducible to, the current neoliberal frame. We close by examining how contemporary critical digital literacy studies could offer alternatives to Meta's corporate curriculum moving forward.

The corporate curriculum

The problematizations offered by social media companies can be usefully situated within historical discourses of CSR, whereby corporations loudly undertake 'actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and what is required by law' (McWilliams and Siegel, 2001: 117). Such actions, among others, include companies taking voluntary responsibility for negative externalities, efforts toward sustainability, sponsoring philanthropic endeavours, or developing positive community relations (Schneider, 2020). Internal regulatory bodies set up by social media companies are useful stages for the performance of CSR, including Facebook's Oversight Board, or the X Transparency Center, which (on the surface) aim to reduce the societal harms generated through their business practices. These quasi-formal arrangements are accompanied by myriad grey CSR media – adverts, blogs, press-releases, interviews, and public appearances.

Private corporations often provide learning resources, lesson plans and educational materials to public schools as part of their CSR strategies, critically studied before as the 'corporate curriculum' (Manning, 1999). A key area, for instance, examines 'petro-pedagogy' – the range of techniques through which fossil fuel industry actors provide educational programmes in schools on topics such as oil refinement, energy infrastructure, and climate change (Tannock, 2020). Naturally, such resources have been shown to 'centre, legitimise, and entrench' (Eaton and Day, 2020: 1) the beliefs and interests of the fossil fuel industry, often perpetuating neoliberalized logics of market deregulation and individual responsibility as proper responses to environmental degradation. Here,

students are taught to change their personal lifestyle habits to combat climate change, over other pedagogical suggestions that could 'challenge the structural growth of fossil fuel consumption' itself (Eaton and Day, 2020: 1). As such, Powell and Gard (2015) use the Foucauldian analytic of governmentality to better understand this situation as an expression of power, demonstrating how corporate curricula function as part of the modes through which dominant modes of existence are made more likely than others in different global settings. For instance, Powell and Gard (2015) reveal how Coca-Cola's international anti-obesity educational programme served to naturalize multinational corporations as valid arbiters of scientific knowledge in schools, in effect creating a normalized model of healthy living that presented responsible consumption of Coca-Cola's products as a key part of a balanced diet in childhood across the world. Similar health initiatives have also been put in place by McDonald's and Nestlé, who offer physical education and nutrition programmes throughout K-12 schooling, respectively (Powell, 2018). The contradictions inherent in such companies doing so, companies which have previously been blamed for 'exacerbating childhood obesity' elsewhere (Powell and Gard, 2015: 855), are clear.

Yet these incongruities are a common feature of the phenomenon in general: curricula disseminated by corporations often directly intervene in the controversies they have previously been associated with, reasserting their own interpretations of the imagined problem-space in a way that aligns with their own interests. In doing so, companies are involved in what Marcuse would call *co-optation* – the discursive practices through which capitalist corporations turn critiques of their operations to their own advantage, semantically hollowing out the terms of opposition that have been levelled at them before (Wolff et al., 1969). Polluting fossil fuels become part of the solution to climate change, ultra-processed foods part of a healthy diet. The 'healthy' habit-forming, civilizing, universalizing, and colonial dimensions of global corporate curricula will be explored in more depth in the following empirical sections, particularly in relation to the thought of Norbert Elias (2000).

We should note that corporate curricula are not limited to the classroom. While lesson plans are crucial elements, as we will explore below, Fontdevila et al. (2021: 133) show how corporations also involve themselves in pedagogical policy-making and delivery through key 'repertoires and logics of action'. Most pertinently for this present article, *knowledge mobilization* involves corporations directly producing scientific research to refer to in their educational propositions, directly funding researchers in universities and research institutes to produce knowledge for them, or indirectly funding researchers through intermediary research institutions. Second, *networking* describes the 'constitution of formalized alliances or coalitions of actors in the public policy arena' in order to 'channel policy influence' (Fontdevila et al., 2021: 136) in ways amenable to the corporation in question. Here we may think of partnerships with national government departments, international governing bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or charities, which solidify public/private dependencies within public education. Both logics are present in the analysis in this article. Currently, the presence of Big Tech companies in schools has been examined largely in terms of infrastructure, with Google, Microsoft and Apple, for example, all competing to supply global classrooms with learning technologies

of one kind or another (Moeller, 2020). Furthermore, although work has begun to address how such actors, including social media companies, are increasingly concerned with providing digital literacy resources to schools (Higdon, 2022), a sustained critical analysis of their actual content is much needed.

Approach to documents

The following sections will analyse Meta's corporate curriculum through case studies of Facebook's Get Digital resources and Instagram's Community Programs and Guides. The relevant documents are listed in Table 1. Recalling the aims of the article, we seek to establish how social media companies are inviting audiences to see and speak about the problems surrounding their services in certain ways, which actors they involve, what ideas they mobilize, and what patterns of user thought and behaviour they aim to inculcate in doing so. Toward this end, we adopt a style of 'practice-oriented document analysis' (Asdal and Reinertsen, 2022) that examines how documents circulate to create intertextual meaning within and between different social groups, materializing discourse through their creation, dissemination, and exchange (Gitelman, 2014). For this article, we examine the PDF files and web pages that act as the core document basis of Meta's corporate curriculum, centred around the two aforementioned campaigns (these documents are listed in Table 1). We do so as they exist in a 'doubly material' form (Asdal and Reinertsen, 2022: 5), namely, as they exist as objects in of themselves (as documents), but also as they bring contingent values, norms and ideations '*into* documents'. In regard to the latter, we will specifically show how the rhetorical practices, dramatic repertoires, narratives, and intertextual relations of these documents function to educate and civilize social media users through certain knowledges and logics of verification. Overall, we treat the genre of documents below as a product of Meta's broader efforts toward CSR, but also as they help create a certain 'documentary reality' (Smith, 1974) that is fundamental to the practices of normalizing social media users in various global contexts today.

In these documents, we did not expect Meta to present themselves as culpable for the problems that may arise through use of their services. Rather, we were interested in the specific ways in which they address these problems, and, in doing so, how Meta *constructs* them as problems to be viewed, spoken about and acted upon in certain ways. While Meta's corporate curriculum spills across several media, we have chosen to organize our results on a platform-specific basis. This reflects the different registers and platform-focus of the materials themselves, which are hosted on separate websites. For instance, Facebook's Get Digital resources are openly educational and centred around digital literacy, while Instagram's Community Programs and Guides are communication campaigns with a more public-facing tone. We treat platform mediums, interventions and interface designs as analytically distinct, while allowing their convergence through a cross-platform analysis to be conducted later (Venturini et al., 2018). It is at this point of convergence that the shared universalizing assumptions about a responsible, educated user – foreshadowing elements of Elias's civilizing process – become jointly visible, in ways that extend beyond their shared economic ownership or platform-specific intentions.

Get Digital

On its website, Meta describes Get Digital as a programme of 'research-informed lessons, tips and resources' that will educate youths, via parents, caregivers and educators, to 'creatively, compassionately and safely use, control and build technology to improve individual and community prosperity and well-being' (About, 2021, in Table 1). The programme is split into five 'digital citizenship and well-being pillars'. 'Digital foundations' teaches basic digital privacy skills; 'Digital wellness' trains users in online resilience; 'Digital engagement' encourages information literacy and inclusive interactions; 'Digital empowerment' teaches social media for transformative social change; and 'Digital opportunities' develops skills for digital careers (see Table 1 for details of these documents).

In the resources provided for educators, each pillar is broken down into several individual lesson plans, which include classroom scripts, educator materials, and student activities. For instance, the 'Digital foundations' pillar contains lesson plans titled 'Privacy and you', while 'Digital empowerment' has lessons titled 'Building your activist network'. Every lesson has been created in partnership with a range of prestigious organizations, such as the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University or the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, while the entire programme has been endorsed by numerous international partners, such as DigCitCommit, UNESCO, and the National PTA. In this way, Get Digital operationalizes some of the key justificatory logics of the corporate curriculum introduced above, granting its interventions a sense of scientific, pedagogical, and political validity as a result.

'Digital wellness'

Each lesson found through Get Digital first spells out the particular problems it is seeking to address, whether accessing digital employment ('Digital opportunities', 2022, in Table 1) or respectful community interactions ('Digital engagement', 2022, in Table 1), and then offers activities that invite learners to reflect upon and practice solutions to them. More often than not, this involves the individual or group being encouraged to change their own thinking and habits related to the issue in question. Lessons contained in the 'Digital wellness' (2021, in Table 1) suite is exemplary of what this looks like in action. These lessons, Meta states, teach students the 'core skills' of 'managing stress and other emotions, developing resilience, and recognizing healthy relationships' online. To mitigate against the threat of depression and anxiety that comes with increased social media use, especially for youth (Orben et al., 2024), such lessons, for instance, encourage users to actively manage their online identity and reputation, cultivate self-respect, and practise positive thinking.

When faced with stressful situations online, perhaps resulting from negative feelings of social comparison, for example, one lesson plan teaches students gratitude and ways to 'engage with others online with respect and empathy' ('Digital wellness', 2021, in Table 1). Another lesson trains students how to carve out space for self-compassion when faced with emotionally challenging moments on platforms. On the surface, such mindfulness exercises could be useful tactics to help users manage online stress.

Table 1. List of documents analysed.

Shortened title	Date (stated or first time fully archived)	Title	URL	Archived URL
About	11 Apr. 2021	Get Digital: About	https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital/about	https://web.archive.org/web/20210411072718/https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital/about
Get Digital	14 Dec. 2020	Get Digital	https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital/	https://web.archive.org/web/20201214022742/https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital
Digital foundations	18 Mar. 2022	Digital foundations	https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital/educators/foundations	https://web.archive.org/web/20220318042405/https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital/educators/foundations
Digital empowerment	18 Mar. 2022	Digital empowerment	https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital/educators/empowerment	https://web.archive.org/web/20220318042434/https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital/educators/empowerment
Digital engagement	25 Feb. 2022	Digital engagement	https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital/educators/engagement	https://web.archive.org/web/20220225052725/https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital/educators/engagement
Digital opportunities	18 Mar. 2022	Digital opportunities	https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital/educators/opportunities	https://web.archive.org/web/20220318042443/https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital/educators/opportunities
Digital wellness	21 Jun. 2021	Digital wellness	https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital/educators/wellness	https://web.archive.org/web/20210621172312/https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital/educators/wellness

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Shortened title	Date (stated or first time fully archived)	Title	URL	Archived URL
My Digital World	29 Oct. 2021	A Better Digital World Starts with Us	https://mydigitalworld.fb.com/ssa/	https://web.archive.org/web/20211029143714/https://mydigitalworld.fb.com/ssa/
We Think Digital	18 Apr. 2019	A Better Digital World Starts with Us	https://wethinkdigital.fb.com/	https://web.archive.org/web/20190418055255/https://wethinkdigital.fb.com/
Soy Digital	6 Jul. 2019	Un mejor mundo digital empieza con nosotros	https://wethinkdigital.fb.com/ar/es-ar/	https://web.archive.org/web/20190706122224/https://wethinkdigital.fb.com/ar/es-ar/
Community	12 Nov. 2019	Community	https://about.instagram.com/community	https://web.archive.org/web/20191112043348/https://about.instagram.com/community
Programs	6 Feb. 2020	Programs	https://about.instagram.com/community/programs	https://web.archive.org/web/20200206052714/https://about.instagram.com/community/programs
Parents	23 Oct. 2019	Parents	https://about.instagram.com/community/parents	https://web.archive.org/web/20191023091439/https://about.instagram.com/community/parents
A Parent and Carer's Guide to Instagram	8 Feb. 2022	A Parent and Carer's Guide to Instagram	https://about.instagram.com/en-us/file/869108057130490/IG-Parent-Guide-EU-v3.pdf	https://web.archive.org/web/20220208114735/https://about.instagram.com/en-us/file/869108057130490/IG-Parent-Guide-EU-v3.pdf
Pressure to Be Perfect	7 Mar. 2020	Pressure to Be Perfect	https://about.instagram.com/community/programs/pressure-to-be-perfect	https://web.archive.org/web/20200307135610/https://about.instagram.com/community/programs/pressure-to-be-perfect

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Shortened title	Date (stated or first time fully archived)	Title	URL	Archived URL
Pressure to Be Perfect Toolkit	Dec. 2019	A Toolkit Addressing the Pressure to be Perfect	https://pressuretobe.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/INVI001-Toolkit-PDF-Final-6.pdf	https://web.archive.org/web/20200618045928/https://36onle3pfmmp41336929ysw4-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/INVI001-Toolkit-PDF-Final-6.pdf
Instagram X Jed Foundation	16 May 2020	Instagram X Jed Foundation Pressure to Be Perfect is here to help you be your whole self safely and take care of others on Instagram	https://pressuretobeperfect.jedfoundation.org/	https://web.archive.org/web/20200516040237/https://pressuretobeperfect.jedfoundation.org/
Anti-Bullying	6 Feb. 2020	Anti-Bullying	https://about.instagram.com/community/anti-bullying	https://web.archive.org/web/20200206051953/https://about.instagram.com/community/anti-bullying

However, the way they appear as isolated practices in these lessons has serious limitations. Chiefly, this is because mindfulness alone, in this commodified state, tends to curtail any exploration of the actual sources of stress, or any examination of how and why it is experienced as such by particular individuals and demographics. By focusing solely on *managing* stress, as opposed to examining the conditions that contribute to its manifestation, such as living in prejudiced digital environments hostile to certain peoples and ways of life, for example, the mindfulness offered by Meta treats declining well-being on social media as an internal relation. As a result, differential experiences of well-being become emptied of their latent critical force. In making this point, we recall similar critiques directed at the apolitical modalities of mindfulness likewise found in positive psychology, whose psychometric instruments and concepts emerge from Western individualistic cultures and neoliberal behaviourism (Baym et al., 2020; van Zyl et al., 2024). Accordingly, while maybe well-intentioned, it is important to recognize that the norms and values contained in these lessons emerge from a particular time and place, casting doubt on their appropriateness and efficacy in global classrooms as a result.

Elsewhere, the lesson plan titled 'Online reputation' encourages students to cultivate 'a better sense of the audience' that may encounter their posts on the internet ('Digital wellness', 2021, in Table 1). They are invited to do so in recognition of the fact that the publicity that comes with social media use opens up the chance of negative interactions or hurtful comments from others. While one obvious 'solution' to this problem could be to simply quit the platforms where the abuse is happening, Meta teaches an alternative response. Primarily, when faced with 'online content about yourself that you don't like', this lesson prompts students to practice *counter-speech*, which, for Meta, means giving 'more visibility to positive stories about yourself' on your social media profile. Specifically, this is achieved 'by creating and managing content that reflects you in a positive light'. For Meta, the problem of hate speech, then, is solved by *more speech* from the targeted party, presenting more positive views that cancel out what came before.

By training the student users addressed in these materials to practise counter-speech against the harmful communications directed at them, Meta is making a commitment to liberal ideals of the 'marketplace of ideas', whereby competing viewpoints and perspectives 'face-off' through public deliberation (Hans, 2020: 756). These users are asked to imagine themselves as if they were in a constant battle of public opinion, where they must fight for positive versions of themselves to be visible in the face of potential criticism from others online. The direction to curate and maintain one's presence and identity on social media, despite its psychological risks is, similarly to the positive psychology encountered above, a local proposition, this time channelling Silicon Valley's contemporaneous (and peculiar) educational emphasis on networking, self-optimization and free speech as foundational features of selfhood (Williamson, 2017). Such a stance takes the value of a public social media activity for granted, naturalizing (and universalizing) what is in fact a historically contingent, geographically bound, and necessarily contrived, vision of human sociality. Crucially, such commitments also accompany a strategic economic function: prompting more speech on platforms results in the generation of more user data, which Meta can then sell to interested third parties for greater profits (Fuchs, 2015).

These types of individualized solutions to the problems of social media are characteristic of the lesson plans found throughout the Get Digital programme. Combined, they educate users to think that whether social media is a problematic force in their lives – if it harms well-being, leads to diminished community relations, or creates vacuums of truth, for example – boils down to individual decisions, thought processes, and habits. Much the same as with petro-pedagogies, then, this burdening of the user to *live well* on social media perpetuates existing neoliberal logics of responsibilization (Docherty, 2025), whereby self-care is the key protection against the stressors of hostile, extractive datafied environments (like social media). In the absence of valued welfare or community support structures, holding your own as a stable individual – a healthy, responsible, and wise user – is rendered as a moral duty, resonating with the broader call not to burden the state or those around you with your own failings (Brown, 2015). Such framings mask how platforms are themselves involved in the manifestation of these imagined problems of use, foreclosing any consideration of how platforms both construct and profit from the styles of datafied (exploitative) existence observable upon them.

Global reach

These Get Digital resources are accessed through the English-language version of Meta's Safety Centre. Yet links can also be found to other digital citizenship and well-being learning resources tailored to specific regions and countries of the globe. For instance, 'My Digital World' (2021, in Table 1) offers materials for educators in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and North Africa; 'We Think Digital' (2019, in Table 1) provides for educators across the Asia-Pacific region; with 'Soy Digital' (2019, in Table 1) designed for Latin America and the Caribbean. Each of these programmes, Meta states, were developed with a range of regional partners, such as Digify Africa, the Kenan Foundation Asia, and ICT Impact, respectively. Each of these portals has slightly different designs, colour schemes, and supporting images – usually demonstrative of the (imagined) regional contexts of use. There are also slight variations in the type of learning materials available through each portal. For instance, interactive quizzes can be found through the 'We Think Digital' portal, and foundational modules such as 'Internet 101' can be found on 'Soy Digital'. As such, there appears to be a level of regional sensitivity to Meta's social media corporate curriculum.

However, when you examine more closely the resources and materials that are offered through these various regional portals, it quickly becomes clear that they all flow back to, and from, Get Digital's original five pillars of digital citizenship and well-being. Often, the lesson plans detailed above have simply been translated from the original English version, with hyperlinks taking you to videos, resources, and information hosted on Get Digital's English-language page. As such, these regional resources are very much centralized, entwined with and tied to Meta's (US) local vision of digital literacy, well-being, and individual control. We can think of this in terms of the *coloniality of power*, whereby Western epistemologies flatten any potential differences in how we could interpret human existence, social life, and worldly relations in other regions (Quijano, 2000). In doing so, and as we will fully explore in the following sections, such impositions seek to order and

constrain human thought and behaviour in certain directions, toward certain ends, at the expense of others. Namely, this vision of globalized digital literacy, which, in Meta's own words, seeks to 'build a global community of responsible digital citizens' (Get Digital, 2020, see Table 1), is very much imbued with the same individualized, neoliberalized values contained within the Get Digital curriculum examined above. Moreover, foreshadowing arguments we will make in the final section, we can see how such goals carry within them a universalist teleology – these pedagogical interventions, that is, somewhat grandly, are meant to lead toward a better, more civilized, world society – a goal Meta, and its leader Mark Zuckerberg, have not been shy of articulating in the past (Haupt, 2021).

Instagram's Community Programs and Guides

Our second case focuses on Instagram's materials included under the 'Community' section of the company website, such as its community 'Programs', a series of campaigns, information resources and videos created in coordination with 'organizations, experts, academics, and communities […] to educate people about ways to have safe and positive experiences on Instagram' (Programs, 2020, in Table 1). Such resources are split into eight hashtag-driven campaigns. 'Pressure to Be Perfect', for example, created with the Jed Foundation, encourages authentic self-expression, body positivity, and self-care through conscious use; 'Speaking Authentically', in collaboration with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, seeks to 'normalize conversations about mental health and inspire people' online; 'Managing Time Online' (#TimeWellSpent) advocates mindful digital interactions; and 'Encouraging Kindness' (#KindComments) trains users in 'spreading kindness' through positive posting (Programs, 2020, in Table 1). These materials, like Get Digital, are sometimes tailored to specific national contexts, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Brazil, India, and France. While the educational impetus is similar across these contexts, they are differentiated by the local 'expert' voices brought in to legitimize their interventions.

This is particularly evident in the guide titled 'A Parent and Carer's Guide to Instagram', of which there are 40 versions in different languages. This guide, featured in the Instagram Community section, intends to help parents 'navigate positive social media habits with your teen' (2022: 52, in Table 1), chiefly through a repeated emphasis on 'intentional' use, self-care, and having 'safe and positive experiences' on the platform. All such guides begin with an overview of how Instagram works, with detailed walkthroughs of its safety, privacy, interaction-management, time-management, and security tools. However, each is prefaced with local contextualization; the India guide opens with words from Ranjana Kumari of the Centre for Social Research and Vineet Kumar of the CyberPeace Foundation, for example, while the US edition partners with ConnectSafely and the Child Mind Institute. Through such enrolments, Instagram presents their corporate curriculum as part of, to use Caplan's (2023) terminology, a mode of 'networked platform governance', emphasizing time and again that they have worked with international experts and NGOs to develop their response to the problems surrounding their services.

In an English version for Europe, 'digital parenting coach' Elizabeth Milovidov invites

> every parent and carer to sit down with their teen and really talk to them about how they use Instagram, *why they enjoy using it* […] better understanding of the apps teens are using, and how to make the most of the safety features, parents really can be *supportive, positive digital parents.* ('A Parent and Carer's Guide to Instagram', 2022: 4, in Table 1,our emphasis).

Here, parents are encouraged to promote positive use rather than censor it completely. To do the latter, as the above quote implies, is to *not be* a supportive or positive digital parent. The idea is for parents to take Instagram for granted in their children's lives, rather than question its presence there at all. What is more, any actual instruction on responsible Instagram use is meant to come from parents themselves, likewise enrolled as part of Instagram's economic machinations to keep its users, whatever age, scrolling. That is, the parent, in a dystopian turn, is the actor who secures Instagram's current and future user base through pre-existing parental mechanisms of care and love.

'Please scroll responsibly'

In contrast to Get Digital, which primarily provides lessons, Instagram's Community Programs and Guides are more diffuse and playful, often taking the form of entertaining videos, quizzes, stories and celebrity interviews. As one guide states, we are invited to view these materials not as 'rule book[s]' but as 'tool book[s]' ('Pressure to be Perfect Toolkit', 2019: 3, in Table 1). Nevertheless, such tools are still motivated by the same responsibilized ethos already identified above: the problems of Instagram are said to be solvable by making changes to individual habits, with users meant to adopt optimized modes of interaction for the sake of their own well-being. 'Pressure to be Perfect', for example, echoing the analysis above, encourages users to treat themselves as public figures with public audiences, advocating for a constant management of their connections and 'sharing with sensitivity' to avoid harmful rebuttals to their posts. One must, the guide states, 'think about *where* you'll share it and *who* will see it' ('Pressure to be Perfect Toolkit', 2019: 6, in Table 1) to cultivate positive interactions online. Here, it seems hate speech is accepted as a risk of use. It is up to the user to mitigate this by tailoring their content accordingly.

Another problem considered in this guide is the idea that life on Instagram is presented as 'perfected and polished' ('Pressure to be Perfect Toolkit', 2019: 28), and could lead to negative self-comparison. In response, users are encouraged to be mindful of this fact, and treat others' posts with a pinch of salt:

> You want to get inspired to make changes and explore new things, but not get into a space where you feel like you can't win because you are lacking something someone else has. ('Pressure to be Perfect Toolkit', 2019: 28, in Table 1)

In these guides, we see the cultivation of multiple moral values like kindness, supportiveness or compassion, which are behaviourally translated into specific acts like sharing positive reactions, stickers, or posting 'kind comments' (Programs, 2020, in Table 1). There are also repeated gestures toward authenticity, identified in slogans like 'showing yourself as you are', or hashtags such as #BeReal, or #ComeAsYouAre (Programs, 2020, in Table 1). The user, then, must strike a strange balance: being inspired by those deemed of a higher status, while maintaining confidence in their own abilities in turn.

This mental reorientation is accompanied by advice for users to engage with Instagram's various curatorial tools. For example, features such as 'Restrict', which make comments from certain people invisible, hiding like counts from posts, or 'muting' or 'blocking' others. By performing 'routine maintenance', such as 'trimming' their friend lists, as the 'Pressure to be Perfect Toolkit' (2019: 26, in Table 1) states, and through constant engagement with these technical controls, the user is invited to 'open up space' for 'people who lift you up' on their feeds, and not be dragged down by the negativity that proliferates online. Rather than addressing those who spread idealized body images, for example, mis- or disinformation, or racialized or gender-based hate speech, such advice seems to accept these as the facts of social media. As with Meta's 'Digital wellness' lesson examined earlier, the happy, healthy user is not one that seeks to make a collective change to the current state of play on social media, but rather one who cultivates a practice of mindful acceptance and individual, intentional use to manage its pressures on their own.

A key element found throughout these Community Programs and Guides is the issue of controlling screen time. Responding to a prevalent theme of the so-called 'tech-lash', whereby social media is viewed as parasite on users' attention, and echoing the former name of the Centre for Humane Technology, Instagram makes the case that what is important is *time well spent* online, as opposed to rigid temporal boundaries. In the 'Pressure to be Perfect Toolkit' (2019: 32, in Table 1), for example, the user is invited to 'consider what the right amount of Instagram use is for you'. This is referred to in the toolkit, somewhat mystically, as 'The Balancing Act'. To aid this, as above, Instagram offers temporal technical controls, such as dashboards and time reminders. A highly evocative example of the moralized prescriptions contained within these materials is displayed in a short video found within the programme 'Managing Time Online' (Programs, 2020). The video begins with a smartphone on a bed in a bedroom at night. Quickly, notifications, emojis, gifs, comments, and other social media interactions begin to come out of the phone. Soon, these interactions saturate the entire room, conveying a sense of attention overload. The video then cuts to a simple question: 'Overcome with emotion?' Presumably, the audience is supposed to answer in the affirmative. In response, the video ends with another, telling invocation: 'Please scroll responsibly' (Programs, 2020). Crystallizing the arguments that we have been making so far, we are immediately reminded of other global CSR campaigns surrounding gambling or alcohol, which similarly burden the individual with the practice of self-control in response to their habit-forming tendencies, rather than question whether such habits are, indeed, worthwhile for them at all.

Civilizing the user

This section argues that the problematizations we have uncovered in Meta's corporate curriculum above not only limit the discursive and practical terms of engagement with their services, but also function in a broader historical sense to *civilize the user*. This phrase is inspired by the psycho- and socio-genetic investigations of sociologist Norbert Elias (2000), who examined, among other things, the modes through which processes of Western development, extant over the past 300 years or so, can be understood as a dialectical *civilizing process*. Here, societies seek to define themselves against (internal and external) 'un-civilized' elements, as achieved through the expansion and differentiation of 'affect controls' (Elias, 2000: 451), established and acquired through social codes, manners, techniques, skills and habits. These operative social norms are sometimes codified, sometimes not, variously directed through political administration or cultural genesis, experienced through their inculcation as well as through their resistances (Elias, 2000). For van Krieken (2024: 26) such civilizing processes can be understood as 'social technology', insofar as they shape patterns in human thought and behaviour. Importantly for this article, historical technological developments, like the emergence of commercial social media in the early 21st century, 'goes hand-in-hand with changes in the relevant forms of social organization' (van Krieken, 2024: 26), something Elias (1995: 12) describes as two 'interwoven strands'. Therefore, civilizing processes, in part, both mitigate and harness the sundry disruptions that new technology can bring, while various social uses of technology, in turn, function to create new norms around which civilizing processes emerge.

For Elias (2000), 'civilization' is not a static object, but a process in which individuals are immersed, and which has a singular aim: cultivating self-constraint. This focus, for Elias, emerged chiefly as an attempt to curb the observable human tendency toward violence. In particular, and resonating with the findings above, Elias identifies a movement toward self-control and individual responsibility as a key marker of the spread of civilization, made necessary due to the decreasing cultural and physical distance between social groups and classes within increasingly urbanized populations (Elias et al., 2013). Elias (2000) analysed a precursor to these modes of self-constraint in the emerging courtly norms of the Middle Ages, arguing that the civilizing process involves a 'refinement of manners' through which human drives are internally pacified (2000: 389). In this way, the normativity of manners is effective to the extent that they become internalized, a bodily forgetting that authors like John Dewey (1922) explored in terms of habit, and which Ravaisson would term habit's *second nature* (Carlisle, 2014: 17–31). Interestingly, and recalling Bennett's (2013) work on habitualization and power, Elias's approach resonates with Foucault's work on the institutional disciplining of the body in panoptic societies, which seeks to mould thought, affect and behaviour through individuals' subjection to external norms by penetrating discursive forces (Foucault, 1995).

As the empirical analysis above demonstrates, the guides, lessons, and programmes that constitute Meta's social media corporate curriculum function in a very similar fashion to the normative processes examined by Dewey, Elias and Foucault – an unusual, if

not impossible, theoretical alignment (Smith, 1999). That is, the corporate curriculum seeks to train users in correct forms of use, healthy habits, and self-control. What is more, the targeting of school-age children and parents in these materials makes a disconcerting appropriation of US Pragmatist Dewey's own belief that educating the young is a key way to instil virtuous (democratic) habits in future generations, against the current limits of the present. For Meta, however, and for platforms in general, we have instead shown how the problems surrounding social media are imagined to be caused by users not behaving correctly online, as opposed to either being the result of societal deficiencies that structure that use, or the business operations and designs of platforms themselves. In other words, the problems surrounding social media boil down to users being 'not yet civilized enough' (Elias, 2000: 41), unable to meet the normative demands of online life. Unintentional, uncontrolled, and passive uses of platforms are presented as the causes of platform's stated toxicities – nothing more, nothing less. In response, social media corporate curricula promote more *intentional*, *kind*, *authentic* and *mindful* use as a refinement of manners to combat the slovenly nature of its user base, signalling that users must pacify their internal drives to reach more civilized states.

Although the normalizing operations of social media have been examined through Eliasian terms before, in particular when analysing the habitualizing designs of platforms like Twitter (Murthy, 2017) and Facebook (Hallinan, 2021), or the spread of anger and ressentiment in social media (van Krieken, 2024), our article further reveals that the wider educational materials surrounding social media can be as influential as their particular affordances. Obviously the material and discursive elements of technology are not separate but rather work together to configure the user in different socio-technical contexts (Woolgar, 1990). However, by viewing the social media corporate curriculum as part of the civilizing attempts made toward internal pacification, we have highlighted new ways to put Elias, and related thinkers, to use in the analysis of social media and its habitualizing effects today. More precisely, what we see in the development of platforms' curricula is what Elias (2000) terms the moulding of users' *affect controls*, namely the setting up of social norms that establish the boundaries of good and bad practice, civilized and uncivilized use – the transgression of which results in psychological denigration, public shame or personal embarrassment.

While Elias's framework is analytically productive, we explicitly distance ourselves from its developmental assumptions and its implicit universalism. Although Elias addressed the different concepts of civilization among different Western societies and acknowledged the possibility of regressions or de-civilizing processes, his analysis is primarily concerned with tracing how the civilizing process unfolds in European historical contexts, in which particular forms of self-restraint and affect regulation are considered markers of human progress. This emphasis has been critiqued for foregrounding historically specific European cultures, which risk being read as universal, without due consideration of the forms of state, national and ethnic violence involved in their spread and expression (Pepperell, 2016). It is nonetheless precisely because of this orientation that Elias is a useful point of reference for examining Meta's corporate curriculum. That is, Meta's construction of the educated, responsible and intentional user operates within a similar universalist discursive terrain, framing certain modes of conduct and self-

regulation as progressively useful and globally desirable. In this sense, we argue that Meta's CSR initiatives can be read as a contemporary instantiation of civilizing discourse, in which corporate responsibility is enacted through pedagogical interventions that seek to discipline users into globally legible governable subjects. Rather than endorsing Elias's vision, then, we mobilize his work to highlight the civilizing function expressed by Meta's social media corporate curriculum, and, more broadly, to illuminate how historical civilizing logics continue to animate global modalities of governance today, including CSR practies.

Conclusion

This article has drawn attention to the growing appropriation of digital literacy discourses by technology companies like Meta to respond to and counter the criticisms made against their services. We have shown that, by placing on individuals the burden of living well on platforms, Meta's social media corporate curriculum arranges users and technology in relationships of responsibilized control, markedly shaped by the present historical context of neoliberalism, against which the problems of platforms are currently articulated, expressed and acted upon. Through Elias, however, we can also see how the calls for social media self-constraint function as part of longer historical trajectories to do with Western civilization, and the troubling universalist binaries this carries with it. Combined, such problematizations serve as a limit to how we are invited to interpret, discuss and act upon the various concerns associated with social media in the present day. In doing so, these pedagogical resources can be considered social technologies that both entwine with and reshape existing political, economic and psychological norms to guide user activity in certain directions, at the expense of others. In response to the risk that the observable harms of social media could be cause for complete disconnection, that is, Meta's modalities of responsible, resilient use serve a strategic function: they seek to maintain user presence on platforms in order to maintain the channels of datafication necessary for its continued business operations (Sadowski, 2019).

The vested interests and values contained within Meta's pedagogic problematizations should by now be clear. We will close by briefly mentioning a few alternatives to the style of digital literacy examined above. Recent feminist, decolonial and postcolonial perspectives (Bali, 2019; Pronzato and Markham, 2023), for example, developing the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (2005), argue that a critical digital literacy should bring into view the economic logics, ambient politics, and ideologies that condition social media use, rather than focusing solely on the styles, habits and patterns of use themselves. In Freire's terminology, this involves cultivating a political sensitivity to the oppressions and the oppressive conditions of the platform economy as a present-day apparatus of power. In contrast to an individualized, technical and solutionist ethic, Paulo Freire's (2005) work inspires a *problem-posing pedagogy*, rooted in critical inquiry and consciousness-raising (*conscientização*). Here, forces of oppression are something to be de-totalized and understood through dialogue, transformed as such through radical acts of self-reflection, communal examination and communication.

In contrast to the normative tone of Meta's corporate curriculum, which leans heavily upon expert voices from centres of epistemological power, this approach calls for the traditional divide between educator and learner to be overcome and replaced by co-investigative relationships. This ethos is not uncommon, and has proven valuable for rethinking how we investigate and teach digital issues to date, inspiring practices like reflexive digital auto-ethnographies (Markham, 2019) or the creative prototyping of apps (Lury et al., 2024). It should be said that a critical digital literacy focused on a renewed personal political awareness devoid of the collective could serve simply to redistribute, rather than challenge, the primary responsibility of the individual to handle the problems of social media – this time as a subject obliged to inhabit a critical attitude. Nevertheless, these brief examples quickly illustrate that Meta's vision of digital literacy is not the only one on offer.

The voices of users themselves are absent from the analysis above, and the extent to which different groups are following, or even aware of, the prescriptions contained within Meta's corporate curriculum it remains to be seen. A more sustained analysis of how Meta's problematizations are built into or rub up against the actual designs and technical functions of platforms would be a useful line of inquiry, further consolidating the type of discursive material analysis promoted throughout this article as a result. We invite future research to build on these gaps, in order to contribute to the continuing effort to examine platforms (and the activities of their proponents) as they function to produce contingent and normalizing ways of life. The idea that platforms exist as neutral tools simply wielded by autonomous agents for their own ends is no longer tenable. However, we will end by driving the point home once again: platforms and their proponents are styling the world in particular ways, through particular problematizations, in relation to particular historical political movements. Analysing *how* is the first step toward refusing the observable forms such activity supports and shapes.

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