

Responsibility for Recommendations

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slides available at michaelrandallbarnes.com/talks

When **we speak** online, to whom we're speaking is largely determined by complex **recommender systems** that have grown in importance as **social media expands** every year.

This talk examines the **power** of these systems through the lens of **speech act theory**, asking what responsibilities should follow from these (speech) acts of *recommending*.

THE SHIFT

Can A.I. Be Blamed for a Teen's Suicide?

The mother of a 14-year-old Florida boy says he became obsessed with a chatbot on Character.AI before his death.





What's the **Relationship**
Between Social Media Platforms
and their Users' Speech?

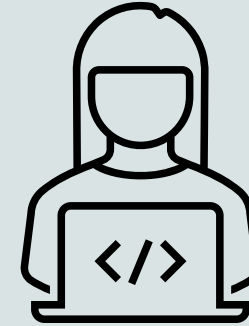
What is the **Ontology** of Our
Online Speech Acts?

How Should this Affect Our
Understanding of **Responsibility**
When Things Go Wrong?



The Plan

Set up = ~~Why This Matters~~

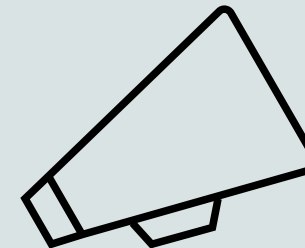


Part 1: Background

1. Clarify: My Aims
2. Clarify: How Speech Act Theory Can Help

Part 2: Speech Acts on Social Media

1. Amplification vs. Recommendation
2. Affordances as Communicative



Wrap Things Up



Part 1.1

My aims

My claims

This talk argues **social media companies share in the responsibility** for the harms that occur on their platforms by demonstrating how they are **constitutive intermediaries**.

Platforms are Responsible

I use **speech act theory** and the concept of **affordances** to show how **platforms shape users' speech**, and also **perform speech acts themselves**.

I'll show how **recommendations**, and also certain **design features**, are **second-personal speech acts** that **embed values**.

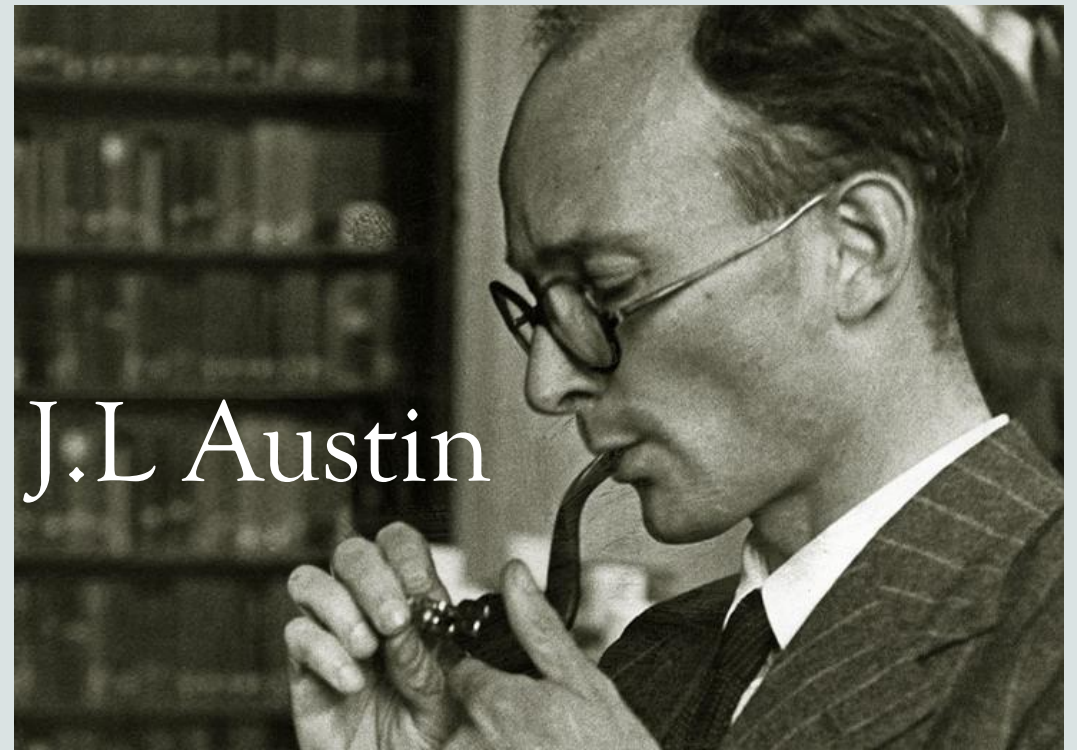
Part 1.2

How Can Speech Act Theory Help?

Speech is Action.

Through speech, we do more than transfer information. We *request, command, insult, invite, warn, inquire, propose,* etc. In doing so, we make concrete changes to the social landscape.

Speech Act Theory



J.L Austin

The Locutionary Act

The act of “saying something”.

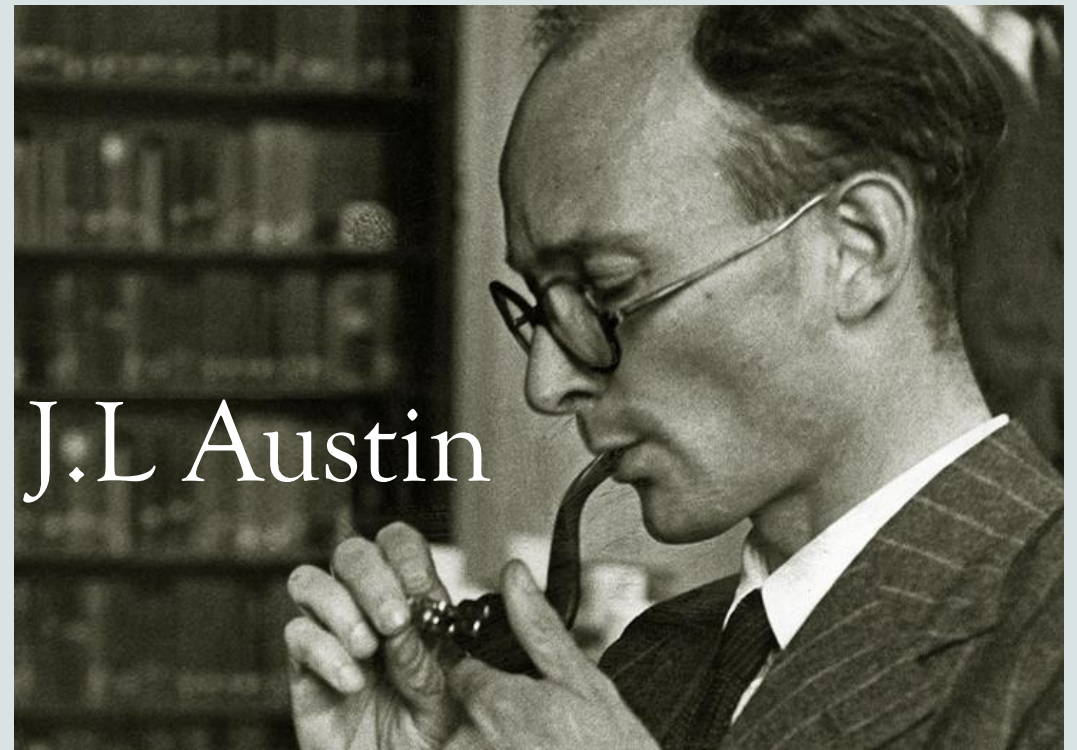
The Illocutionary Act

The act performed “in speaking”.

The Perlocutionary Act

The act effected “by speaking”.

Speech Act Theory



J.L Austin

Hornsby and Langton: “some kinds of speech
can set the conditions for other kinds of
speech: they make some speech acts possible
for some, and impossible for others”

Speech Act Theory



Three Observations From Speech Act Theory

1. Speech acts are **uses**; they are acts that occur in particular **contexts**.
2. The **audience** of a speech act is part of its context, and partly determines illocutionary force.
3. The **uptake** an audience gives can play an important—indeed fundamental—role in (re)constituting a speech act.

Speech Act Theory

On The Internet

Social Media Platforms **control the context** of our discursive interactions.

With **recommender systems** platforms **choose the audience** of an utterance, inserting it into particular contexts of **use**.

Through various **features** and their **affordances**, platforms **shape user actions** – including the **uptake** that further shapes our speech acts.



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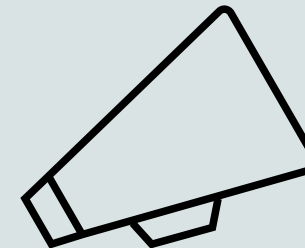
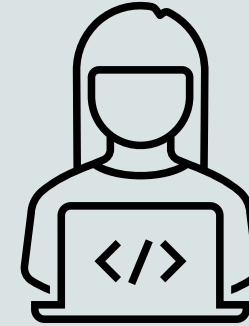
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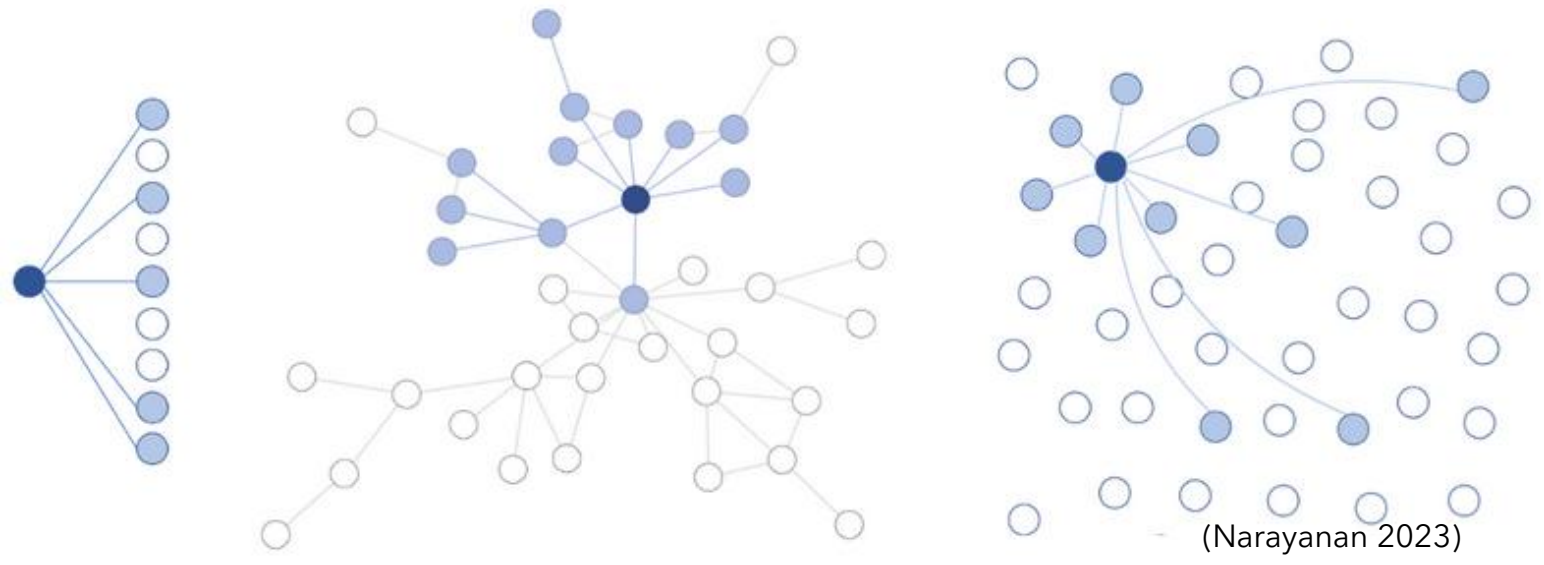
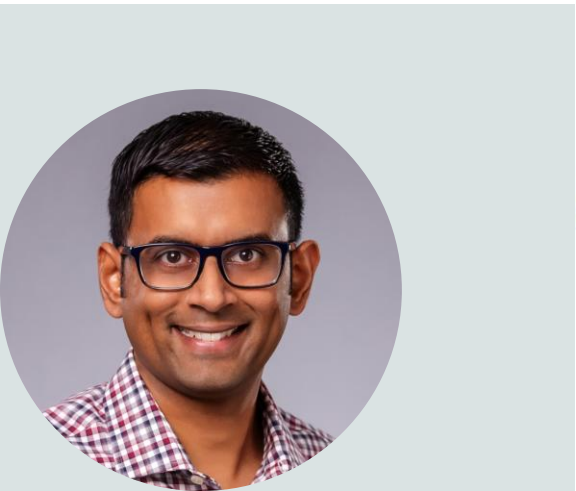


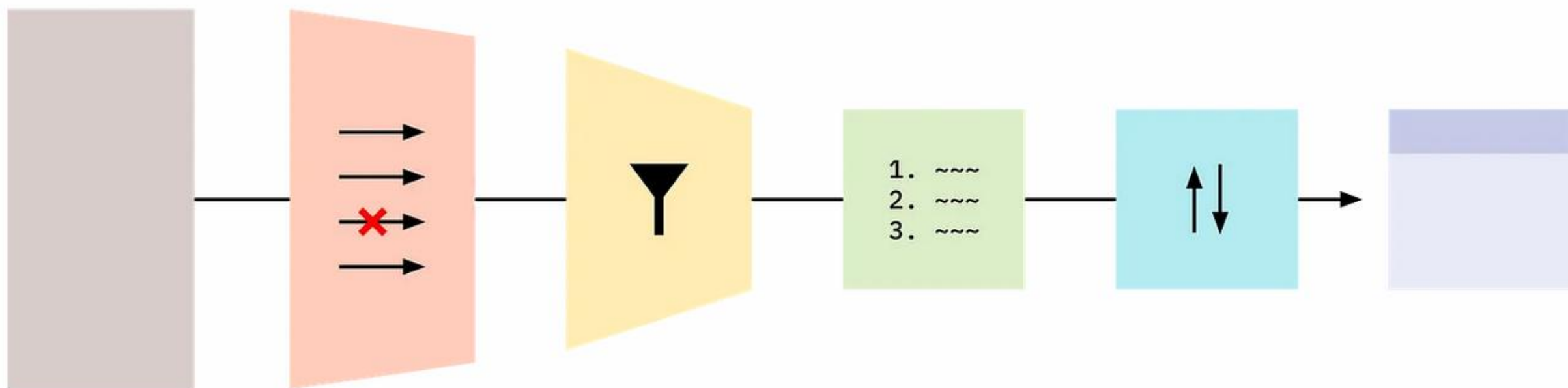


Part 2.1
Amplifications
vs.
Recommendations

Table 2: Three stylized models of information propagation.

	Subscription	Network	Algorithm
What a user sees	Posts by those they've subscribed to	Posts by (or shared by) those they've subscribed to	Posts the algorithm predicts the user will like best
Examples	Newspapers, Substack, FB pre-2009, IG pre-2022	Word of mouth, the web, Twitter pre-2016, Mastodon	TikTok, Google Discover, YouTube
What impacts a post's reach	Poster's subscriber count	Both subscriber count and content	The content of the post





Moderation

**Candidate
Generation**

Ranking

Re-ranking

All $> 10^8$ items

$> 10^8$ items

$10^8 \rightarrow 10^2$ items

Same 10^2 items

Same 10^2 items

Top 10^1 items
shown to user

A typical recommender pipeline, along with the approximate number of items retained at each stage for a large platform.

Algorithmic ~~Amplification~~ Recommendation



More Like a Delivery Service
than a Megaphone



The New York Times

A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar's Military

"In 2017, the Rohingya were killed, tortured, raped, and displaced in the thousands as part of the Myanmar security forces' campaign of ethnic cleansing.

In the months and years leading up to the atrocities, Facebook's algorithms were intensifying a storm of hatred against the Rohingya which contributed to real-world violence."

- Agnès Callamard,
Secretary General of *Amnesty International*



"Meta's algorithms proactively amplified and promoted content which incited violence, hatred, and discrimination against the Rohingya – pouring fuel on the fire of long-standing discrimination and substantially increasing the risk of an outbreak of mass violence."

Incitement (Online)

Cases of Delayed Communication

The illocutionary force isn't determined by the context of production, but something else.

Intended Context vs. *Decoded* Context

Jeff Howard



"My claim is that when a platform amplifies wrongful speech, increasing its visibility, it thereby **makes a greater causal contribution to the speaker's wrongdoing**—making his principal wrongdoing worse than it would otherwise be. ... **platform amplification enables wrongful speakers to commit a greater wrong.**"

Recommender Systems Transform Speech, and Make a Moral Difference

They do more than enable wrongful speakers to commit a greater wrong.

By choosing the **audience**, and placing speech acts in new **contexts**, and by **being speech acts** themselves, recommendation show how platforms are **construct wrongful (speech) acts** themselves.

The Speech Act(s) of Recommendations

- Recommendations get the speaker on the hook.

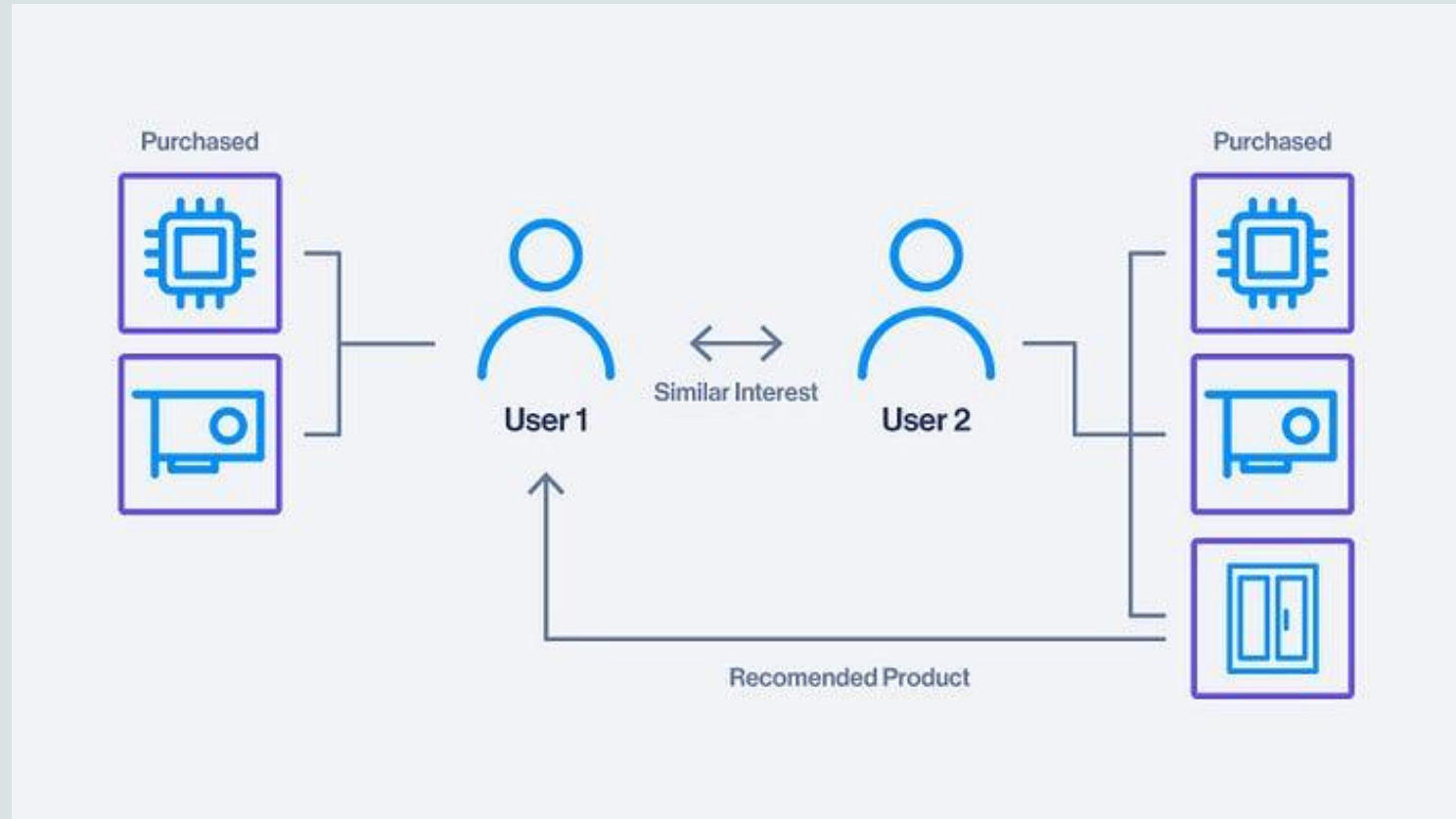


Recommendations

- Recommendations get the speaker on the hook.

Objection: What if they are quite *thin*?

- My Claim: Even when based simply on behavioural data recommendations are still value-laden acts



The Speech Act(s) of Recommendations

"The *content of recommendations is not truth-evaluable*:
when the speaker offers a recommendation, she is *not*
describing things as being a certain way, but *rather inviting*
the audience to do something."

Javier González de Prado Salas & Ivan Milić (2018).

Recommendations have verdictive and exercitive force

The Speech Act(s) of Recommendations

Recommendations have verdictive and exercitive force

Recommendations function as **directives**.

- Different **strength** and **structure** for than **invitations**, **requests**, or demands, but still lead the audience towards some act.

They are **second-personal speech acts**.

- They are issued by **one agent** to **another**: the **recommender** the **recommendee**.

They presuppose the recommendee has reason to **trust** the **recommender's** judgment.

- That is, the recommender is **entitled** to issue their recommendation.

Implicit vs. Explicit Feedback Mechanisms

explicit feedback:

Likes/dislikes, up/down votes follows, ratings, shares, flags, blocks, comments, etc.

implicit feedback:

Watch / 'dwell' time, pages visited, mouse hovering, eye-tracking, etc.



Implicit vs. Explicit Feedback Mechanisms

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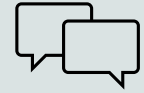
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designers of recommendation
systems make choices
about what signals matter



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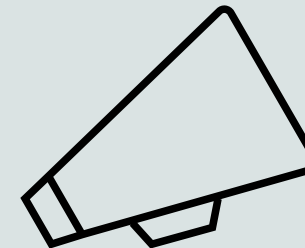
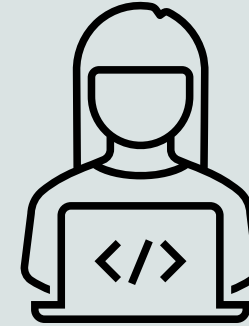
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Wrap Things Up



Part 2.2
Affordances
As Communicative



Affordances



"Affordances **mediate** between a technology's features and its outcomes. Technologies don't make people do things but instead, push, pull, enable, and constrain. **Affordances are how objects shape action for socially situated subjects.**"

- Jenny Davis

Jenny L. Davis

HOW ARTIFACTS AFFORD



The Power and Politics
of Everyday Things

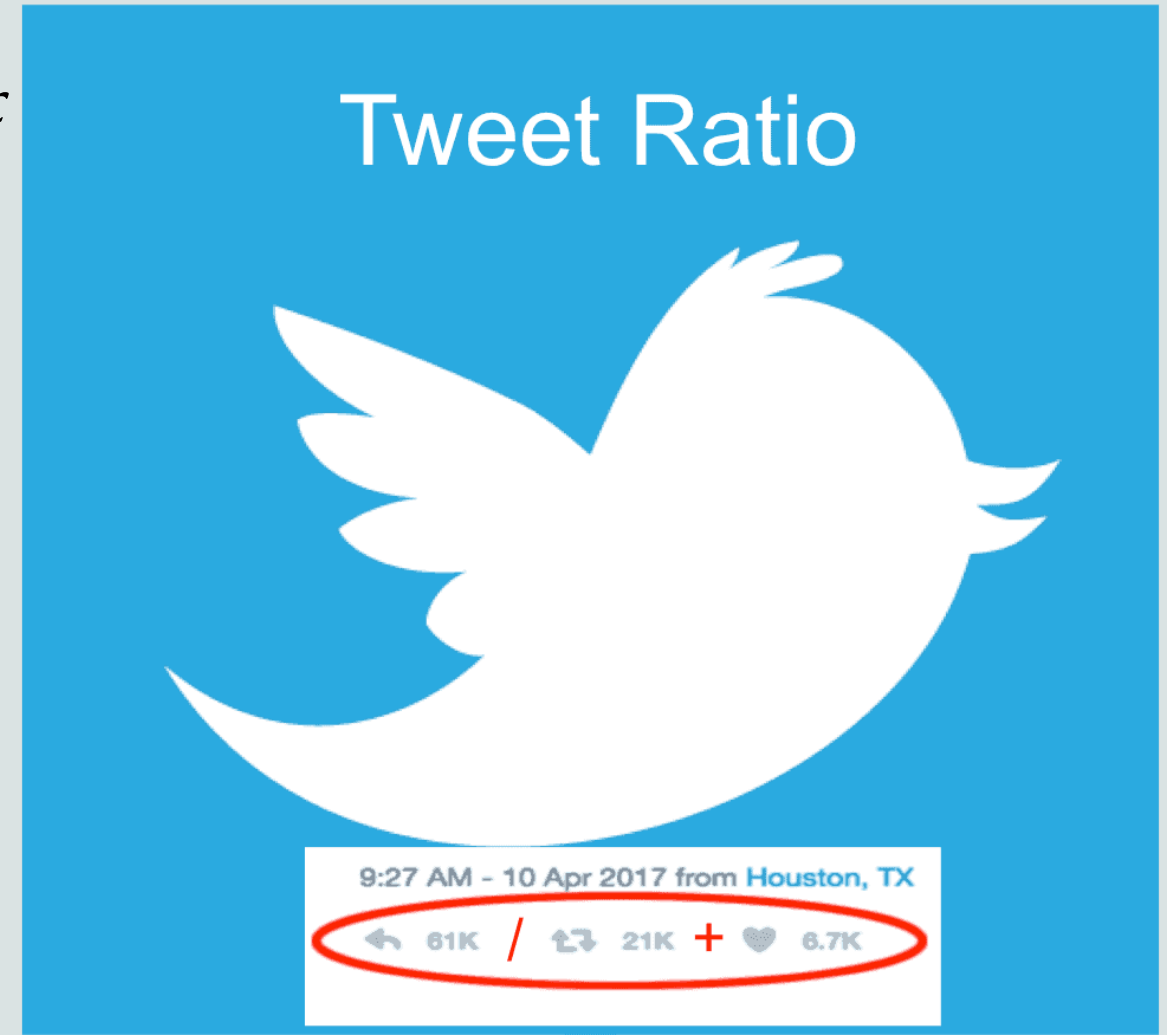
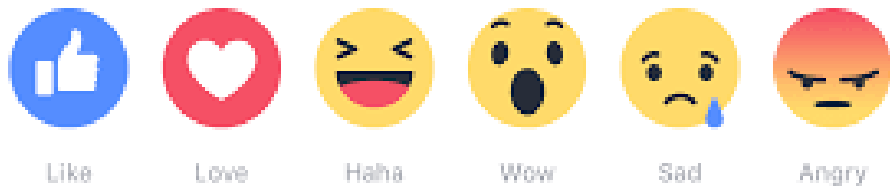


Affordances



Affordances

shape speech acts by **enabling uptake** that impacts the force of an utterance



Affordances
are **Second-Person calls**,
Asking for Interaction

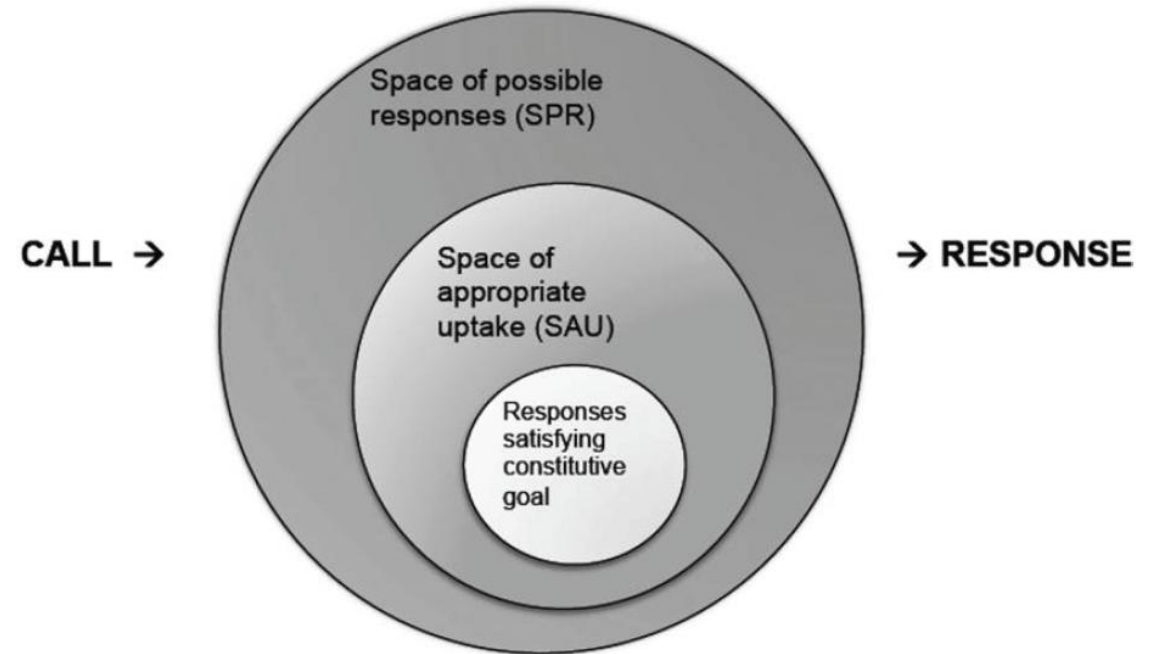
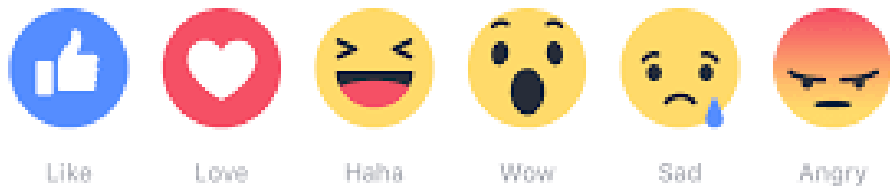


FIG. 1

“Any call creates a normatively articulated space of possible responses by shifting and recasting action possibilities in this way.”

- Lance and Kukla



"Technologies:
request, demand,
encourage,
discourage, refuse,
and allow particular
lines of action."

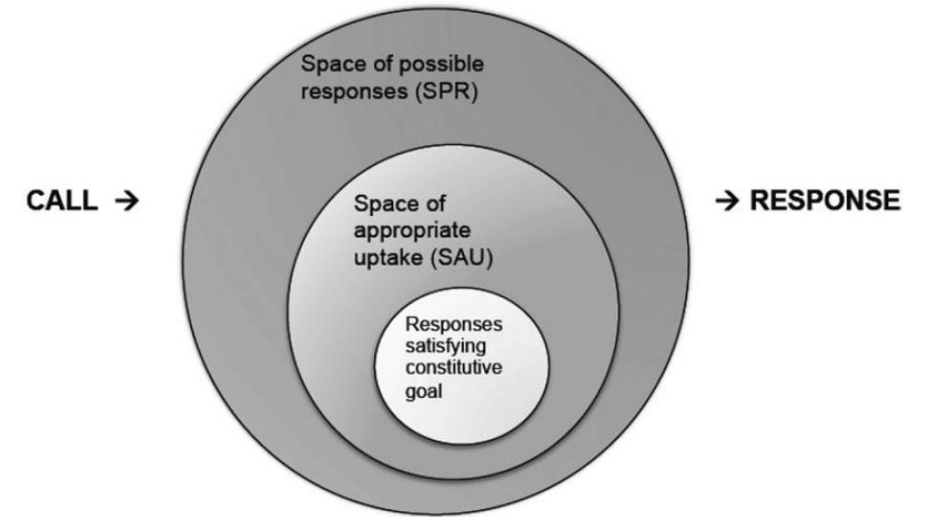
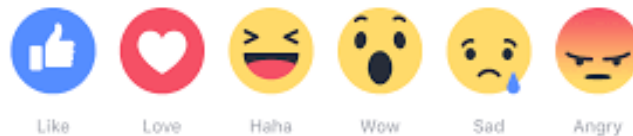


FIG. 1

The *ways* affordances
communicate differ
with regard to their
illocutionary force



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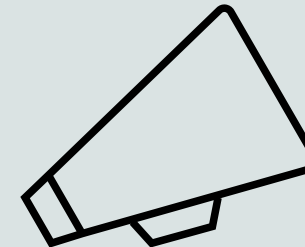
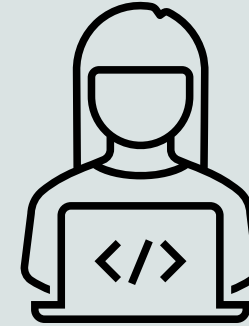
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Platforms provide the context in which
our acts make sense.



"context is not just the backdrop
against which a person speaks;
rather, the context and the
subject mutually determine each
other ongoingly."

- Mary Louise Pratt, 1986,
"Ideology and Speech-Act Theory"



Online platforms are
Constitutive Intermediaries

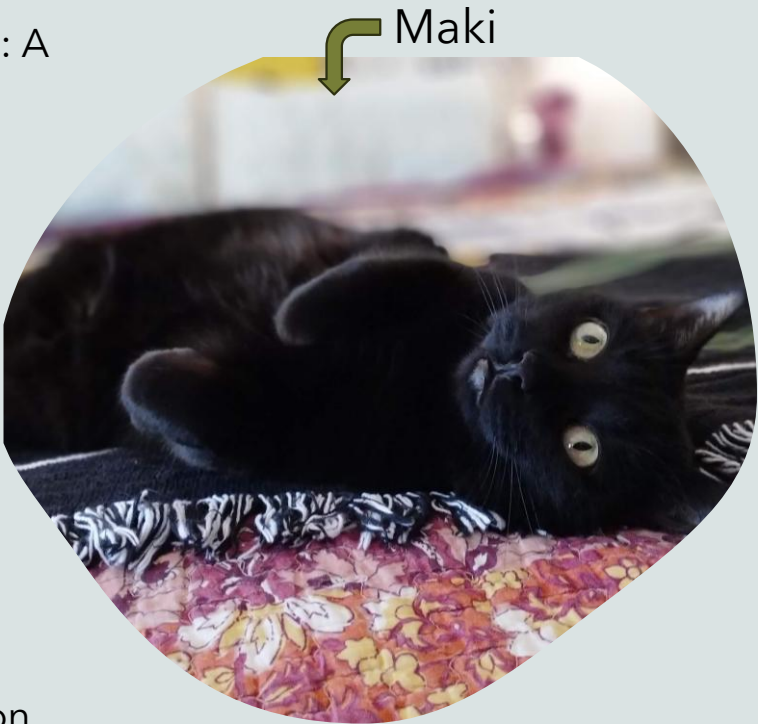
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Thank You



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Wrapping Up



Objection: Isn't this far too over-inclusive of what counts as a speech act?

Speech Act Theory:

Political not Metaphysical