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# Using Linguistic Ethnography to Study Techno Eliteness of Social Media Audiences

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## Introduction

In this chapter, we offer a methodological framework for an in-depth study on ‘techno elite’ audiences. Elite research usually looks into the relationships between those who rule and those who are ruled, the social characteristics of those who exercise power, the relations between elites and society, elite recruitment and elite circulation (cf. Aron, 1950a, 1950b; Putnam, 1976). A social analysis of elites in an era profoundly shaped by digital technologies is timely and vital to update existing understanding of power relationships and societal structures in relation to media content production and consumption. Traditionally, research methodology for elite studies is based on static social categories fixated in sectors, organizations and positions. As argued by many scholars in elite, intellectual, and class studies, it is difficult to define who the elites are given the fuzziness and overloaded meanings of the term and the increasingly convergent media industries. The notion of “elites”, argued Kidd and Nicholls (1998), just like those of “middle class” or “intellectuals”, needs to evolve from a “primitive sense of classification, that is of an attempt to position individuals within a static social hierarchy, to one in which it signifies complex social characteristics and

dynamic social relationships” (p.xvii). That said, elite cannot be understood (solely) “as an objective phenomenon, measurable in terms of income or occupation or some other clearly definable index”; instead, and perhaps more practically, it should be understood as “one with a subjective component – with consciousness, ideology and language” (ibid.). It is precisely in this latter realm that we want to investigate ‘techno elite audience’ from a linguistic ethnographic perspective, because a combination of linguistic and ethnographic approaches helps understand how ‘eliteness’ of both cultural producers and their audiences is demonstrated, expressed, constructed and situated.

We explain in this chapter why and how the use of linguistic ethnography can renew existing methodologies for understanding the dynamics of the power relationships between cultural producers and contemporary audiences in an environment saturated with interactive social media. Bourdieu, who considered literary writers as cultural producers, argued that literary writers should be comprehended as “producers of symbolic goods” (Bourdieu, 1985, p.14). Their audiences are, traditionally speaking, the consumers of these symbolic goods. This perspective on literary writers as cultural producers positions writers as professionals who have to find a balance between a creative notion of artistic freedom (they no longer need to be dependent on patronage) and an economic notion of a market of symbolic goods on which they sell their “products” (Bourdieu, 1985, p.15). We address how the participation of audiences online, through communicating their opinions, co-construct, strengthen or challenge established authoritative identity and, in the meantime, also build or shape their own identities and accumulating some social, cultural, technical and economic capitals that Bourdieu (1986) proposes. We elaborate on how to study the comments that readers post on literary writer’s personal weblogs, and we reflect upon the meanings of these comments in relation to construction of eliteness embedded in the traditional relationship between literary writers as cultural producers and their audiences as cultural consumers.

The importance of this chapter lies in showing the need for and the implementation of a multi-method research framework to grasp the extent to which audiences in a digital environment

question or reinforce the eliteness of cultural producers such as literary writers.

### **Elite identity and social media**

Technological development and technical practices (e.g. adoption of new technologies) mutually shape socio-cultural practices. Practices of cultural production and consumption have changed due to the proliferation of digital technologies and social media. But often people take for granted that technologies empower audiences, provide egalitarian and collaborative opportunities, and have the capabilities to democratise access to production and consumption of media. These claims are made without recognizing the huge amount of efforts invested to engineer sociality (Bucher, 2012; van Dijck, 2012; 2013). Besides, there exists some fundamental inequality in social media user participation when a microscope is applied to scrutinise what actually happens on the ground (e.g. “the 1% rule” or “the 90-9-1- principle” which says that the demography of an Internet community usually consists of 90% of the participants of viewing content, 9% of the participants editing content, and 1% of the participants actively creating new content, see Arthur, 2006; Nielsen, 2006). Given the existing inequalities, it is sensible to ask who are the elite audiences these days, and what are the processes of constructing elite identities and behaviours in a social media context.

Take literary writing for example. The authoritative elite identity of literary writers stems from a long tradition (cf. Bennett, 2005), and as such can be related to Max Weber’s notions of traditional and charismatic authority (cf. Weber in Parsons, 1964). Weber sees traditional authority as a system in which legitimacy is ascribed to a specific person whose status is “believed in on the basis of the sanctity of the order and the attendant powers of control as they have been handed down from the past” (Weber in Parsons, 1964, p.341). In line with this conceptualization of traditional authority, one can find resemblance with the image of writing as an ancient renowned occupation in which writers have always been very much aware of their predecessors (Bennett, 2005) and in

which this tradition of literary ancestors functions as “symbolic resources” to the writer (Meizoz, 2007, p.189, own translation). Moreover, one can find ample suggestions in Weber’s understanding of charismatic authority as “a certain quality of an individual personality by which he is set apart from ordinary men” (Weber in Parsons, 1964, pp. 358-359) to the conceptualization of literary authority. In a similar vein, Bourdieu ([1986] 1993) referred to the writer’s charisma as the foundation of the literary field in the nineteenth century. What is more, Weber’s notion of the “followers” (Weber in Parsons, 1964, pp.359, 362) of the person who has charismatic authority is similar to the way Bourdieu ([1992] 1994) several decades later characterised the celebrants and the believers of acknowledged artists. Such charismatic authority is ensued by the belief in a particular person’s “call” or “spiritual duty” that, as a result, is “foreign to economic considerations” (Weber in Parsons, 1964, p.362). In this regard, various scholars theorise the anti-economic logic as a distinct characteristic of the literary writer (e.g. Bourdieu [1986] 1993; Franssen, 2010).

Whereas literary writers today are still widely considered in Romantic terms, i.e. as a unique, talented individual (cf. Bennett, 2005; Donovan et al., 2008), their established elite identity might be challenged on social media where readers’ voices co-exist. Bourdieu, whose work is crucial for theorizing the structure of society as a result of class conflicts and status competition, sees “the literary field” as a social field, which, like other social systems, is highly stratified and has its own hierarchy (Gerhards and Anheier, 1989; Bourdieu, [1992] 1996). With the prevalence of social media, such a hierarchy could potentially be broken down in the train of the circulation of user-generated and user-distributed content, as observed elsewhere<sup>1</sup>. If literature is a social product shaped by both authors and readers (Eagleton, 1988), the co-construction nature is even more evident in modern times where writers and readers meet and interact seamlessly in a closely networked online environment. For example, Skains states that online novel communities expand the dynamic between writers, texts and readers because they allow readers to “influence and shape the texts the author is creating, through feedback and reader-contributed material” (2010, p.96). According to Skains, blogs can be used to build a reciprocal conversation between a writer and the

readers who can use the blog to ask questions, to share ideas or to give feedback. However, Skains underlines that it is the author's choice to change this author-reader relation and to engage in a dialogue online (2010, pp.100-103). This begs for the questions: who owns the power on social media? Are the elites on social media the same as those in real life? What renders their elite identities?

### **Techno eliteness**

Ongoing theoretical development around elitism and the elitist paradigm has critiqued a “normative dimension” and some conventional and widely shared assumptions (or “myths”) of modern societies, as it produces in consequence “a polarizing, polemical style of discourse” (Marcus, 1983, p.23). It is methodologically and theoretically challenging to study elites and difficult to generalise findings because of the problem of identifying whom the elites are and what they do (Moyser and Wagstaffe, 1987). A common agreement in existing elite studies emerging from frequent arguments over definitions and selection procedures is that classes and identities are neither fixed nor durable categories (e.g. Kidd and Nicholls, 1998). To overcome the problems with definitions, some scholars have used Bourdieu's ([1992] 1996) theory of the interconnection between art and the structures of social relations within which art is produced and received to renew methods for elite and social class studies (Heemskerk, 2007; Savage et al., 2013).

Here, we refer techno elite audiences to those who have the capabilities of manipulating digital technologies to acquire, maintain, manage and mobilise resources effectively (a range of rich intellectual, economic, social, cultural and technical capitals in Bourdieu's terms (1986)), thereby possess power to become (economical, political, cultural) elites. The possession of these capitals gives them power (may it be social power (Kidd and Nicholls, 1998, p.xxviii) or economic power<sup>ii</sup> (Swedberg, 2011)) to challenge existing authoritative elite opinions, (re-) creating or (re-) claiming

elite identities. That said, techno elites can 1) render new elite norms and practices, 2) challenge, subvert or sabotage the existing elite norms or practices, and/or 3) reinforce existing eliteness of cultural producers. In a digital world that is highly connected and networked, techno-elite audiences are often seen to exercise their collective power, a collective form of ‘techno eliteness’.

By creating and maintaining a set of resources that can be converted into different forms of capitals, traditional author-reader relationships start to shift, especially in online environments where cultural producers (e.g. literary writers) become more approachable and cultural consumers more vocal. Knowledge, expertise, experiences (tacit and local knowledge), or any other cultural assets can now be inscribed and negotiated and exchanged through online communicative encounters between authors and readers. Compared to the kind of “active audience” discussed in reader-response literary criticism in the 1970s or in cultural studies and reception studies in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Harrison and Barthel, 2009), the interactive nature of the Web today further blurs the division between reader/viewer and author. Authors and readers co-construct sometimes collective, sometimes conflicting, but always temporary and constantly changing identities. This co-production phenomenon is reminiscent of the fandom research by Jenkins (1992; 2004; 2007) where audiences on the one hand strengthen authors’ authority as an originator of a story and a set of characters, but on the other hand, produce new content. In this sense, the emergence of techno elites challenges the traditional boundaries between professionals and amateurs. This notion parallels but simultaneously questions some other theories treating audiences in terms of “produsage” (Bruns, 2012) as “co-producers” (Loosen and Schmidt, 2012) who demonstrate greater interests in (pro-) active and meaningful “participation” (Carpentier, 2011) rather than simply being a product or a recipient who is informed, entertained, educated or engaged.

If we define the ‘techno elite audiences’ as those who have the power to influence, to enact, to enable, and to accumulate social, economic and technical capitals in a particular online environment, they can be found almost omnipresent these days owing to the popularisation of Web 2.0 social media. For example, the “You” chosen as the Time Magazine's Person of the Year 2006,

and more recently the “You” ranked MediaGuardian's annual ranking of the UK's 100 most powerful industry figures 2013<sup>iii</sup>, and other instances on the usage of alternative media for shaping politics in scholarly publications (e.g. the work included in Couldry and Curran, 2003), all reflect the extent to which society and industry (traditionally dominated by moguls, editors and celebrities) are being shaped and transformed by the development and adoption of digital technologies. This omnipresence, which subsequently creates vagueness of meanings and a problem of defining ‘elite’, requires a robust methodological framework to approach the subject. It is worth noting that we do not consider all general public falling into the category of techno elites. In theory, in a democratic and ideal world, everyone has a potential of becoming a techno elite. However, often intersectionality interferes and the inequalities observed in the real society are often replicated in virtual worlds. Our proposal of moving away from generalising the elite category allows a practice-based perspective that sees eliteness as ‘situated’. To us, eliteness is contextualised, demonstrated and performed through narratives and interactions. In this regard, linguistic ethnography serves as a useful methodological framework for grounding “techno eliteness” in different contexts and local storytelling

Unlike Livingstone (1998) and Davis (2005) both of whom have adopted a more rigid definition of “elite”<sup>iv</sup>, Lin's investigation (2012) into how the British public broadcaster BBC engaged with techno elites with their Backstage project, how contemporary media corporates render and recruit elites, and the ease or difficulty of entering the system focuses on practices rather than on socio-economic positions. Lin draws on the corporate's documents, web content, and ethnographic fieldwork data to focus on a group of techno elite who can analyse data and code. This focus allows Lin to find out how BBC envisioned the roles of techno elites in participatory media, and finally built a techno elite community around BBC's resources (data, content, facilities, and human social networks). Although the rich ethnographic data she collected documents many impromptu, spontaneous interactions through which novel ideas were conceived and exchanged, the study on BBC Backstage faces a common challenge of conducting ethnography regarding

standardisation of observation process of gathering, comparing and analysing data. This is where linguistic ethnography comes into sight.

### **Linguistic ethnography: Origins and scope**

Linguistic ethnography can be related to several research traditions, such as sociolinguistics, the ethnography of communication, and linguistic anthropology, all with an interdisciplinary character. Yet, several scholars (see *infra*) point out distinct differences between linguistic ethnography and its ancestors. In general, linguistic ethnography can be distinguished on the basis of its focus on local, personal and relational uses of language to construct identities.

Tusting and Maybin mention that a reconfiguration of approaches as well as “increasing attention to social and cultural dimensions of language” (2007, p.576) marks sociolinguistics. Nevertheless, in recent years these scholars have seen “a growing interest among some British sociolinguists in the potential of combining linguistic analysis with ethnography, in order to probe the relationship between language and social life in more depth” (2007, p.576). Linguistic ethnography, thus, differs from sociolinguistics in its focus on individual practices in a particular context. Moreover, the focus of linguistic ethnography on the “relational” and “interactional” aspects (the first being a broader process, the latter referring to particular moments that build on these relations) of “the building of social worlds” differentiates linguistic ethnography from a sociolinguistic approach (Tsitsipis, 2007, p.631). In this regard, it is essential, according to Jan Blommaert, to comprehend ethnography (including linguistic ethnography) as a “theoretical outlook” and a methodology rather than as a method (2007, p.684).

Creese also underlines some characteristics of linguistic ethnography which make it distinct from other linguistic anthropological traditions: 1) its place within “the new intellectual climate of late modernity and post-structuralism” (2008, p.229), 2) its drawing on different methodological



approaches than “those typically associated with earlier work in linguistic anthropology” (2008, p.233), 3) its combination of “fields of study not typical in earlier linguistic anthropology, such as media studies, feminist post-structuralism and sociology” (2008, p.234), and 4) its focus on “language rather than culture as its principal point of analytical entry” (2008, p.234). In other words, linguistic ethnography is more “disciplinary eclectic” and less centered on “genealogy” as is cultural anthropology (2008, p.236), and it “aligns itself with a particular epistemological view of language in social context” (2008, p.229). This particular epistemological view marries the analytical frameworks provided by linguistics and ethnographic processes of reflexive sensitivity in order to obtain a close, in-depth analysis of “local action and interaction as embedded in a wider social world” (2008, pp.232-233).

To Rampton (2007), linguistic ethnography is characteristic of: 1) an ethnographic focus on the “context for communication” and on the way “meaning takes shape within specific social relations, interactional histories and institutional regimes”, and 2) a linguistic analysis of “the internal organisation of verbal (and other semiotic) data” (2007, p.3). As a result, linguistic ethnography is fit for studying “communication within the temporal unfolding of social processes” (2007, p.3). It enables the researcher to consider simultaneously 1) persons, 2) situated encounters, which means “the events, genres and types of activity in which people, texts and objects interact together” as well as actions and “the use of semiotic materials (signs, language, texts, media)”, and 3) institutions, networks and communities of practice, implying the shaping and possible reproduction of institutions through texts, objects, media, genres and practices (2007, p.3).

Finally, Georgakopoulou sees linguistic ethnography as a subdivision of a broader tradition of ethnography of communication, which is “a way of tapping into ecologies of meaning-making and the participants’ own sense-making and structuring features, their tacit and articulated understandings” (2007, p.20). In her opinion, linguistic ethnography serves as a way out of reductionist approaches to context as it “allows us to tap into processes of recontextualization and dialogicality thus providing valuable insights into natural histories of discourse” (2007, pp.20-21).

This is the reason why linguistic ethnography focuses on the personal and localised construction of narratives in interactions instead of on the use of discourses in conversations or publications. De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2008) suggest that insights can be generated through linking micro-occurrences with macro-social processes to understand societal structures, dynamics of exclusion and inclusion, institutional routines and the performance of social roles. They consider a linguistic ethnographic approach appropriate as this social interactional approach takes into account the contextualised construction in time and place of identity narratives (2008, p.383).

### **Linguistic ethnography and social media audiences**

Social media can be defined in terms of the stories that users tell and share about personal experiences and that express distinct identities (Page, 2012, pp.1-3). Page situates her work on social media within the sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic research traditions of computer-mediated communication studies as well as in literary-critical narrative theory. Her aim is to understand “the ways in which narrative genres, and in particular narratives of personal experience, are being reworked in online contexts at the outset of the twenty-first century” (2012, p.5). She believes that this understanding of the “reworking” of personal experience can be obtained by studying for instance weblogs. Moreover, she defines social media as Internet-based applications that promote social interaction between participants. As such, social media helps construct networks of participants in which everyone can distribute content, yet in which everyone at the same time becomes part of a collective, large-scale audience for this content. Although interaction was inscribed in the Internet’s core, it was not until the mid-1990s that interaction became possible and determinant:

“Social media emphasizes the social aspects of the web genres in question, particularly the communicative interaction between participants and the implications this might have for

macro-social issues such as personal or group identity.” (Page, 2012, p.7)

According to Rettberg (2008a), blogs in specific can be understood as evolving “narratives” of one’s identity. These narratives may be fragments taken from a larger story, but still incarnate one’s perspectives. Other scholars share this view that blogs can be understood in a narrative way: Dennen, for instance, says, “bloggers weave the narratives of their lives into posts” (2009, p.23). Hevern argues, “weblogs enable their authors to share ongoing personal narratives of daily and seasonal life in ways that no other cyberspatial form allows” (2004, p.332). Hookway refers to blogs as “self-narratives” (2008, p.39), and Serfaty conceptualises blogs as “personal narratives” and “self-representational writing” (2004, p.1). Despite this established understanding of the weblog in terms of constructed narratives, there is a lack of empirical studies on “the narrative potential of blogs” (Page, 2011, p.220). Page argues that, given the interactive potential of the blog, the study of blogging as an activity and blogs as personal accounts can help to understand the construction, use and “refashioning” of narratives in today’s digital society (2011, p.223). She states, “the comments seem to have a co-constructive influence on the narrative development” of the blog content (2011, p.225), because comments influence the narrators’ linguistic choices, which results in the emergence of a “heterogeneous and polyvocal mixture of (...) narratives” (Page, 2012, pp.58-59). Serfaty, too, argues that this narrative of the self cannot be constructed in isolation, and is characterised by a collaborative process whereby others constantly intrude in the blogger’s private space. Rather than talking about a private space, she delineates a weblog as a “micro-society created by a weblog and its audience” (Serfaty, 2004, p.65) in which either one-to-one or one-to-many conversations between bloggers and distinct readers take place, or readers engage in many-to-many communication (cf. Tapscott, 1985; Aigrain, 2006) between themselves. Most of the methods for audience studies can be still divided into quantitative methods (e.g., social network analysis and content analysis) and qualitative research methods (e.g., interviews, observation, discourse analysis of historic or policy documents) (see e.g., Patriarche et al., 2004). What is more, often in new media studies, one may find a focus on social actions dominating over the meaning of the actual texts. For

instance, an overview of weblog research by Schmidt (2007, p.1410) suggests that narrative studies of identity- and authority-building are largely missing or marginal. Often researchers “give the social actors analytical precedence over the textual manifestation of blogging routines”, Schmidt concluded (2007, p.1414).

By contrast, we argue that to truly comprehend how and to what extent the online communicative encounter between a blogging literary writer and the commenting audiences is challenging the traditional identity and authority of literary writers, attention should go to the construction of elite identity in the text. This calls for a methodology that is directed at understanding textual interactions and that concentrates on the communicative actions, both in a narrative and a relational dimension, where techno elite audiences are gaining a voice in the construction of identities in the online space of a writer’s personal weblog. As a result, linguistic ethnography adds to the practice-based perspective by enabling a deeper analysis of the comments that techno elite audiences publish in response to cultural producers’ weblog posts, and how this might undermine, nuance or strengthen the traditional cultural producer’s authoritative identity and eliteness.

### **Studying eliteness of blogging writers and commenting readers**

Common methodological issues arising from using qualitative methods for elite studies include managing access to fields, securing interviews with elite respondents (it is often reported that elite respondents were reluctant to be interviewed, e.g., Galaskiewicz, 1987), limitation of generalising findings from observational research based on selective perception and partial recording (e.g. Brannen, 1987; Winkler, 1987), and ethical issues regarding data protection, privacy and confidentiality. To overcome these issues and to account for the relation between the narrative content and the communicational form of (online) representations of elite identity, linguistic

ethnography is a valuable methodology for elite studies.

To grasp how exactly a linguistic ethnographic research approach can help to study and understand the eliteness of social media audiences we refer to the analytical framework developed in light of the linguistic ethnographic analysis of literary writers' personal weblogs (cf. Beyl, 2011; 2013). In this study of literary writers' personal weblogs a linguistic ethnographic approach instigates an analysis of the interdependence of a particular blog's narrative content, relational form, and personal context.

Firstly, a thematic narrative analysis (cf. Riessman, 2008) is conducted of a selection of a specific literary writer's blog posts and related reader comments. A thematic narrative analysis of the reader comments aims to unveil the narratives that the commenting readers use to represent and construct the blogging writer's literary identity. As such, it can be understood how these readers, by making use of an elite position by having their voices heard, co-construct the literary writer's elite identity in a narrative way. This means that to study the narrative content of a particular literary writer's personal weblog in relation to the construction of elite identity of the literary writer, "narrative" should be understood in a thematic and expressive manner. Riessman's work (2008), which connects narrative with the way meaning is communicated and relates narrative to personal lives in terms of self-construction, offers a good guideline. Riessman considers narrative as a biographical statement that "encompasses long sections of talk-extended accounts of lives in context" (2008, p.7). Moreover, Tamboukou emphasises the fluidity and openness of this type of narratives (2008, p.290). This perspective results from a sociological understanding of narrative as a practice, a sense-making process, and as conversation that takes place within the context of social relations (Hyvärinen, 2008, pp.452-453), whereas at the same time attention is paid to narrative as an individual's use of symbolic representations (Bornat, 2008, pp.347-352).

Coding narrative themes that found the 'text' of the blog posts and comments allows the researcher to consider the literary writer's personal weblog as a space in which both the writer and the readers construct a symbolically meaningful representation of literary identity.. Specifically,

according to Riessman (2008: 64), this means circling and highlighting words in the (blog) texts. During this process of reading and re-reading the texts, themes emerge. The researcher then connects concepts, discursive constructs, and categories from prior related research, theory and analysis to this “nominal” thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008: 64) to understand to what extent research subjects make use of and construct both narratives and counter-narratives in their texts. Narrative analysis, thus, considers “the active constructing processes through which individual subjects attempt to account for their lives” (Emerson and Frosh, 2004: 7), which implies thorough knowledge of the specificity of the case as well as of prior theory and concepts to inform coding and interpretation of narrative segments in the text under study.

Concretely, this means that in literary writers’ blog posts and their readers’ blog comments it is of interest to look for the way prior narratives on literary identity, namely traditional and charismatic narratives like “the writer as genius”, are called upon or are nuanced in the comments that are published in a particular writer’s personal blog. Codes, which the researcher attaches to the readers’ comments, are thus a combination of prior theory development and in vivo constructions, e.g. “reinforcing mystique”, “personal life of the reader”, “identification with the writer”, etc. (cf. Beyl, unpublished doctoral research). It follows from this that the readers’ comments in which, for instance, readers express similar personality traits or comparable personal experiences indicate that the readers identify with the writer and consider themselves as equal conversation partners to the writer. This devalues the charismatic narrative of the writer as genius who is considered as superhuman. Hence, the narrative analysis of a particular writer’s blog shows that the commenting readers nuance, omit or complement the narratives, as present in the theory on literary identity, with other and newer narratives, such as a narrative wherein the encounter and similarity between writers and readers is stressed. By contrast, reader comments that highlight the impact that the literary work of the writer in question has on them in terms of “magic”, “a spell”, “a gift” or even “a medicine” reinforce the traditional and charismatic identity of the literary writer (cf. Beyl, unpublished doctoral research).

Secondly, a linguistic ethnographic approach calls for a thematic analysis of the relationality of the writer's and the readers' blog comments. The aim here is to explore the communicational form, apart from the narrative content, of the interactions between the blogging writer and the commenting readers. This implies a re-coding of the words and phrases in the blog comments put forward by both the readers and the literary writer, this time in relation to notions of dialogue and dissemination that may be simultaneously present in these particular online encounters (cf. Rettberg, 2008b, pp.5-6). This part of the analysis of literary writers' personal blogs results in codes such as "agreeing with the writer" and "defending the writer" (dissemination), or "disagreeing with the writer" and "referring to personal memories" (dialogue) (cf. Beyl, unpublished doctoral research). This shows to what extent interactions take place to their fullest potential, i.e. as communication in which the literary writer and the reader regard one another as equal conversation partners (dialogue), or to what extent there remains a predominance of the writer's voice (dissemination).

Thirdly, a linguistic ethnographic account requires an analysis of the personal context of the weblog in question. This part of the study serves as a way to frame and to understand the distinctiveness of the online (self-) representations and interactions. This contextual analysis can involve in-depth interviews with the blogging writers and the commenting readers in an attempt to understand their motives for blogging and commenting as well as their perception of their relationships both online and offline. Furthermore, it accounts for a detailed interpretation of the extra-situational representation of the blogging writer, for instance, of the self-representation on the writer's personal website, the publisher's promotional representation of the writer, the interface and layout of the comments on the writer's weblog as well as the writer's offline (literary) performances and occupations. This allows getting a better idea of the type of writer whom one stands for and of the extent to which this extra-situational representation returns in the blog.

In sum, considering the analysis of the narrative content, of the relational form as well as of the context of a particular writer's personal weblog as a whole allows the researcher to understand

how social media audiences make use of their capitals to co-construct (strengthening, nuancing or undermining) the literary writer's eliteness as cultural producer.

## **Conclusion**

The concept of 'techno elites' interrogates, politicises, conceptualises and provokes thoughts on the power relationships between cultural producers and their audiences in digital societies. This concept allows us to ponder this compound socio-technical process of negotiating power. Adopting a practice-based perspective, techno eliteness is seen as liquid, fluid and temporal. Linguistic ethnography advances elite and social media audience research by providing an interdisciplinary, mixed-method analysis of (online) texts to understand the practices, representations, interactions, and communications that construct identities. Through the interactive construction of representations, in which traditional and charismatic eliteness is challenged and/or strengthened, audiences respond to traditional cultural producers via social media, and in turn build their own techno elite identities. The value of linguistic ethnography lies in its effectiveness for studying various linguistic usages and the construction of (self-) narratives, and in turn (self-selected, self-enrolled) elite identities in online interactive encounters, weblogs in particular. Instead of employing a range of static groups defined by their occupations or incomes (or properties) and presenting the 'techno elites' as a fixed category, linguistic ethnography allows one to think more flexibly and realistically about the roles and practices of contemporary audiences in a digital era, and to effectively address the fluidity of identities in liquid modernity (cf. Bauman, 1991). In comparison to classic ethnographic studies, linguistic ethnography allows us to comprehend how identities are constructed through narratives in a personal context. Moreover, it seeks to unveil how participants adopt and adapt several narratives in their interactions and what kind of identities result from these narratives and interactions. In so doing, linguistic ethnography adds rigour by offering a



contextualised, practice-based, narrative-focused perspective to elite studies.

We argue that the natures and characteristics of social media need to be studied in relation to the contexts in which they are used, to the actual texts that are produced, as well as to the interaction between the users (including audiences, broadcasters, writers) who are involved in digital self-representation, in order to understand the changing practices in media industries. Fornäs et al. state that computer-mediated communication needs to be studied as a symbolic construction of identity (2002, pp.5-8). In a similar vein, we argue that the weblog text, in terms of both its narrative content and its relational form, should serve as the fulcrum of analysis. Analysing the narrative content allows one to treat a distinct cultural producer's weblog as both a public and personal space that instigates the construction of a symbolically meaningful representation of cultural identity through weblog posts and comments. Moreover, studying the relational form of the interactions (dialogue versus dissemination) that take place on a weblog may lead to a rethink or re-definition of the asymmetrical-symmetrical form of the author-audience relationships on the cultural producer's weblog. Finally, contextualising weblog content and form allows one to examine to what extent the weblog is used in a congruous or disconnecting way in comparison to the way one is (self-) represented outside of one's blog. In order to touch upon all three aspects, linguistic ethnography is viable and valuable because it instigates a multi-perspective analysis of how social media genres, such as weblogs, play a part in the construction of 'techno eliteness' of social media audiences in view of cultural producers' traditional and charismatic eliteness.

Linguistic ethnography lends itself to a practice-based perspective, which is adequate for capturing the socio-technical dynamics in the formation process of a techno elite group, taking into account the uncertainties and contingencies introduced by new, emergent technologies, on which techno elites so much depend. The linguistic ethnography methodology discussed in this chapter intends to contribute to the ongoing search for robust methodologies for elite research because of its capability of capturing everyday narratives and practices. It innovates communication and audience studies by allowing researchers to study how exactly cultural producers and their audiences

negotiate narrative, interactive and contextualised constructions of multiple elite identities in a social media context.

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For example, the development of free/open source software used for the websites for civil and social actions (e.g., mySociety.org and Ushahidi.com, both of which use digital technologies to make people powerful by developing free and open source software for individual and organisations around the world who want to build copies of the sites they build) and the openly accessible Wikipedia, preceded the Arab Spring movement, a revolutionary wave of political demonstrations, protests, and civil wars occurring in the Arab world that began on 18 December 2010 and are still on-going.

<sup>ii</sup>The latter can be exemplified by the kind of self-publishing practices or monetisation and commodification of readers' stories in modern times.

<sup>iii</sup><http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/sep/01/mediaguardian-digital-consumer-most-powerful>

<sup>iv</sup>The elite commentators Livingstone (1998) illustrates are those such as those ruling political elites (politicians, policy makers) and broadcasters, a definition provided by Liebes & Katz (1990). Davis (2005) studies the elite use of media of stock market workers who seemed to fall into the category of "the new capitalist elite" (Freeland 2012).