

Caring for the Internet: Content Moderators and the Maintenance of Empire

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Abstract

Scholarly and journalistic investigations of content moderation have thoroughly documented its emotional impact on workers, but have yet to analyze moderation as care labor. Out of sight from U.S. and European consumers, content moderators are hired by third-party outsourcing firms primarily in the Philippines or India to remove offensive or violent content from internet platforms in order to preserve their profitability and users' emotional well-being. Situating content moderation in the long history of domestic labor relations in the U.S., which were designed to support the expansion of imperial power, this essay proposes new ways of understanding the relationship between affective labor and the procedures of empire.

Keywords

Emotional labor, affective labor, empire, digital labor, content moderation, social media, globalization

Introduction

In the final minutes of Moritz Riesewieck and Hans Block's 2018 documentary, *The Cleaners*, an anonymous Filipina content moderator says of her work: 'When there's something important in your life, you have to keep giving a part of yourself and sacrifice for that cause. I sacrifice myself, yes. Sacrifice is always there. It will always be a part of my life. It's my job to prevent sinful images. I'm a preventer' (*The cleaners* 2018). As a moderator inundated with 'sinful' images that governmental and corporate powers deem too sensitive for common users, she removes violent and offensive content from sites like Facebook or YouTube. The documentarians overlay her narration with video footage of a Good Friday Christian ritual, featuring a Filipino man posed as a crucified Christ. The overlay sets up an analogy that calls viewers' attention to the extent to which moderators are required to sacrifice their mental health—possibly even their souls—in the production of the internet's spaces as comfortable sites of consumption for users in the U.S. or Europe. By romanticizing this Filipina worker as a martyr laboring out of love for the greater good, Riesewieck and Block feminize the labor of content moderation. Indeed, they introduce what has been an unexplored possibility: that content moderation may be understood as a form of care work which demands intense emotional labor performed not just for the well-being of the internet's consumers, but, more aptly, for the imperial powers that her sacrifice sustains. By removing violent content from various virtual spaces, moderators maintain the profitability of social media

platforms, facilitating their expansion as they preserve the psychic and emotional well-being of users in the U.S. and Europe.

The Filipina moderator's narration recalls Arlie Hochschild's definition of emotional labor, a form of work demanded across the service sector industries in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. According to Hochschild, 'emotional labor' may be defined as that which 'requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others—in this case, the state of being cared for in a convivial and safe place. This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality' (1983 p. 20). Content moderators must sublimate their own emotional and social responses to what they witness, taking on the burden of potential trauma in order to sustain the virtual space as one 'convivial and safe.' And while this kind of labor is certainly unique to our current juncture, it has precedents in the history of 'women's work.' Indeed, Silvia Federici and others theorize that the present expansion of service sector jobs may be best understood as the commercialization of domestic labor historically performed within the home by both housewives and their paid, often racialized and/or immigrant servants (Federici 2012). The so-called 'women's work' of the domestic sphere, in other words, is now more formally integrated into the market in the service sector and gig economies. This economic and cultural transformation initiated the expanded use of what I call 'domestic labor relations'¹ across various economic sectors, albeit in adjusted form. It is not only that the care work, housework, and social reproductive responsibilities of housewives as well as servants are commercialized in the service sector economy, in other words, but that the labor relation between housewife and servant is reproduced among workers, employers, and customers in new forms.

This essay will suggest that, though dispersed across transnational networks of production and consumption, U.S. and European consumers and Filipino content moderators are set in a domestic labor relation, a hierarchical arrangement in which racialized workers are emotionally exploited, poorly compensated, and relegated to the 'underside' of the internet in order to support the production of a pseudo-domestic sphere that users of the Global North virtually inhabit. Such a proposition encourages us to recognize that contemporary affective labor occurs within a system of hierarchical relations reminiscent of those forged in the past. Taking its cue from studies of empire which have focused on its 'tense and tender ties,' (Stoler 2001 p.831) how imperialism was lived on the ground, I consider the internet as both a narratively produced and virtually inhabited space in which the designs of empire are played out, and, accordingly, in which its sentiments, affections, and affinities are forged. As currently constituted, the intimate relation between user and moderator is designed to be hierarchical and exploitative. However, by reconceptualizing moderators within a 'global chain of care,' (Hochschild 2000 p. 121) we may imagine alternative affinities and solidarities that resist the reproduction of inequalities.

¹ Labor relations as a concept in the U.S. emerged in the early twentieth century when the labor movement sought to mitigate against the abuses of capital through unionization and by petitioning for labor legislation which safeguarded workers' rights. The National Labor Relations Act of 1935, a foundational statute of U.S. labor law, is representative of the concept's institutional uses which, like the most powerful voices of the labor movement, narrowly defined work and excluded a variety of workers including housewives (who were, of course, unwaged), domestic servants, and agricultural laborers. I use the term 'domestic labor relations' to expand its meaning to recognize housewifery and servitude as forms of labor that are essential to the production of capital.

Domestic Labor Relations and the Imperial Organization of Care

Across various colonial and postcolonial contexts, women's work in the so-called domestic sphere has symbolically as well as materially furthered imperial expansion, both culturally and territorially. The 'domains of the intimate,' Ann Laura Stoler argues, play an important role in shoring up imperial power by 'shaping appropriate and reasoned affect (where one's sympathies should lie), severing intimate bonds and establishing others (which offspring would be acknowledged as one's own), establishing what constituted moral sentiments (family honor or patriotic duty)' (Stoler 2006 p. 2). Since the early nineteenth century, when the figure of the housewife emerged as the 'sovereign of an empire,'² and poorly paid domestic servants or enslaved black women were deemed her 'subjects,' the care work involved in the maintenance of the nation as well as the forwarding of its imperial designs has been distributed across hierarchical networks of feminized and racialized workers. Although the expansion of the service sector redistributed affective labor and care work across various industries and commercial contexts, these forms of labor continue to operate within structures that reproduce the inequalities of the domestic labor system. The 'outsourcing' of care work in transnational service industries has further changed the shape of domestic labor relations, as workers of the Global South perform emotional labor for consumers in the Global North across vast geographic distances and cultural differences. And while scholars have done well to highlight the exploitative nature of content moderation and other contemporary forms of care work, a critical framework attuned to the history of domestic labor allows us to apprehend the conditions of their possibility.

During the nineteenth century, domestic service across the U.S. was largely performed by black and immigrant women and men, whether Irish, German, and black in the Northeast, or Mexican and Chinese in the Southwest and West (Dudden 1983; Boydston 1994; Urban 2017). These labor arrangements were generally spontaneously devised, differing across regions; yet all were coercive, since they demanded that workers assimilate to the cultural mores of Anglo-American domesticity through the suppression of any evidence of cultural, class, or racial difference. Unlike the relation between employer and wage worker which was narrated as a market relation that facilitated the formal equality through use of a contract, domestic labor relations were narrated as occurring within a network of affective bonds using a metaphoric of kinship. The best servants both performed a labor of love, acting as 'part of the family,' and expected nothing in return. In her *Letters to Persons Who Are Engaged in Domestic Service* (1842), Catharine Beecher argues that the emotional labor of servitude is beneficial not just for the family, but for the domestic herself: 'a domestic is brought into contact with a great variety of tempers, and learns to accommodate, and to govern her temper and tongue as she never could do without this kind of trial. A domestic, too, is in a situation in which she is, all the time, called on to give up her own ease and time to promote the comfort of others, and this tends to make the duty of *self-denying benevolence*, more easy to learn' (p. 75). Resonating remarkably with Hochschild's definition of emotional labor, Beecher's advice to domestics recommends that the practices of self-effacement and sublimation will ultimately make them better workers and women. This domestic labor system reinforced the supremacy of Anglo-American cultural practices, demanding that workers renounce

² Catharine Beecher uses this phrase to describe the duties of the housewife in her 1841 *Treatise on the Domestic Economy*, and in each of its 14 reprints. The term is later repeated in *The American Woman's Home* (1869), authored by Beecher and her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe.

an allegiance to their own homes and home cultures to better serve the needs of the American empire.

These demands served not only to reinforce the supremacy of Anglo-American cultural and national interests to which all were beholden, but also to incorporate racialized women into the nation as immutably subordinated workers. The home was narrated as a site of domestication in which housewives were armed with their ‘influence’ to contain and neutralize the ‘savage’ passions and persons which threatened the stability of the home and nation. The domestication of the nation’s foreigners was not merely symbolic—by the end of the nineteenth century, domesticity was institutionalized as a disciplinary mechanism for acculturating Indigenous, convict, and immigrant women to the American home. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn shows in her study of the interrelated histories of care and coercion in the U.S., racialized and working-class women were ‘Americanized’ through their incorporation into the domestic labor system as servants. ‘Even in teaching English,’ she observes, ‘it was assumed that the immigrant women would want and need to learn to talk mostly about domestic matters. Thus the first 20 English lessons outlined in the Commission of Immigration and Housing of California’s *Primer for Foreign-Speaking Women* centered on homemaking duties. After the first set of eight lessons on buying groceries for the family, the lessons moved on to housekeeping. The first lesson in the series began with: I cook. / I wash. / I iron. / I sweep. / I mop. / I dust.’ (2010 p. 76). These workers were assimilated into domesticity as its hard laborers, assigned the ‘dirty work’ of domesticity that Anglo-American housewives were too gentle to do themselves. Such a hierarchical racial order and labor relation was further reinforced in the spatial organization of the home, displacing servants from their former place at the dining room table to dwell in servants’ quarters and kitchens, out of sight. The production of domestic space was thus divided between the performance of an aesthetic—the creation of an image of ideal femininity, family life, and bourgeois virtue—and the intense physical, mental, and emotional labor that such performance demanded.

Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as domestic labor has been increasingly commercialized in service economies, the domestic labor relations forged in the home are reconfigured among workers, employers, and customers in new ways. Spaces of consumption have sought to make reproductive labor more profitable and efficient by redistributing care work, cleaning, cooking, etc., among a greater number workers. An especially telling example of this reconfiguration occurs in the restaurant industry. Using the metaphor of the home to describe both the spatial organization and the gendered, racialized division of labor, restaurants are divided between the ‘Front of House’ and ‘Back of House’ staff. In the front, the most visible staff, hostesses, servers, and bartenders, are ‘expected to look presentable, and be able to deal with the customers. Often they are educated, and have useless degrees in things like ‘English,’ ‘History’—or worse yet—‘Art History’” (Prole 2010 p. 20). These staff are frequently white, and usually women, involved primarily in a performance of affective labor to accommodate customers’ desires. Conversely, the back of house staff is hidden from view, tasked with the hardest and often lowest paying work. Prole, a contemporary proletarian collective, explains: ‘It is common for the entire back of the house to be illegal immigrants working under the table. They don’t have any contact with the customers, and therefore don’t have to look like or speak the same language as the customers’ (2010 p. 19). The kitchen is the loudest, hottest, and most cramped part of the ‘house’ where all of the ‘dirty work’ takes place, usually out of consumers’ view. The commonplace practice of racializing back of the house service labor partakes of the same

discursive patterns and practices as domestic servitude in the nineteenth century, and the spatial organization of the restaurant reproduces the aesthetic demands of domesticity. In the restaurant, hard labor is reserved for those who have a precarious relationship to the nation and stand outside of pathways to political enfranchisement or social inclusion. And though the express purpose of the restaurant industry is not necessarily to strengthen U.S. imperial power, the discourse of corporate expansion and entrepreneurial conquest share an obvious affinity with the logic of empire.

By distributing the care work of content moderation among digital laborers of the Global South, U.S. corporations, acting in cooperation with state powers, repurpose historical domestic labor practices on a transnational scale. Sociologists and anthropologists have suggested that the labor of call center workers in India, for example, is best understood as a form of distant care work, one that demands an intense emotional labor at great personal and social cost (Mankekar & Gupta 2017; Aneesh 2012). These studies, however, have yet to consider the historical labor arrangements which have made the outsourcing and dispersion of care work possible. In the broadest sense, that U.S. tech corporations find sources of ‘cheap labor’ in the Philippines, presently governed by a repressive dictatorial regime which the U.S. unofficially supports, is consistent with the historical legacy of U.S. empire (Gonzalez 2011). A former colonial holding and a state over which the U.S. continues to exercise neocolonial economic and cultural power, the Philippines is home to, their employers boast, the best qualified and most adept content moderators, given their knowledge of U.S. cultural and political mores (Roberts 2015 p. 36). And while some moderation occurs in the U.S. (usually performed by recent college graduates), when outsourced, it is uniformly a poorly paid and under-supported form of work. The labor is generally performed by both men and women who see it as an opportunity to work in a growing field as well as a profitable sector of the global economy. However, most do not advance beyond the rank of moderator, and many do not endure the work for very long. The labor of witnessing suicides, child pornography, acts of war, or other violent threats and acts of violence takes too serious a toll on their mental, emotional, and social health. Given the history of domestic labor relations, it is no surprise that content moderation is largely performed by cultural ‘outsiders,’ who are poorly compensated, abused, and unseen. It recalls too easily the spatial organization of nineteenth-century domesticity in which racialized servants worked, lived, and cared out of sight.

Domesticating Cyberspace

Since its popular availability in the late twentieth century, the internet has been developed in accordance with the ideological assumptions and political interests of its creators and users. Feminist social media and internet scholars have shown, for instance, that social media platforms reinforce the normative gender relations of the offline social world, intensifying women’s role in maintaining social networks (Arcy 2016; Duffy 2015; Ouellette & Wilson 2011; Portwood-Stacer 2014). Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) has also argued that technologies like search engines, and the code that underwrites them, reflect the racial politics of their creators. The design of social media platforms, I suggest, reproduces beliefs about the production and management of domestic space—both ‘private’ and national. As new ‘domains of the intimate,’ social media platforms act as pseudo-domestic spaces, sites on which social relations are played out, and where cultural affinities and moral sentiments are forged. These virtual domestic spaces operate according to the same rules as domestic space offline: while some inhabit it, others are called upon to care for it.

Corporations claim that virtual spaces, especially social media platforms, simulate the social relations of worlds offline, creating the expectation that users should inhabit these spaces as they would their own living rooms. Facebook and YouTube herald their platforms as sites of community and sharing, entreating users to be on their best behavior. Insists Facebook's Community Standards page: 'Every day, people come to Facebook to share their stories, see the world through the eyes of others, and connect with friends and causes. The conversations that happen on Facebook reflect the diversity of a community of more than two billion people communicating across countries and cultures and in dozens of languages, posting everything from text to photos and videos' (Facebook 2019). In this narrative, Facebook offers a cosmopolitan fantasy of global integration familiarly peddled by advocates of globalization's capacity to 'flatten' the world (Friedman 2005), imagining that the platform constructs, in more idealized and globalized form, the social relations of the offline world. YouTube's content policies similarly claim that, 'When you use YouTube, you join a community of people from all over the world. Every cool, new community feature on YouTube involves a certain level of trust. Millions of users respect that trust, and we trust you to be responsible too. Following the guidelines below helps to keep YouTube fun and enjoyable for everyone' (YouTube 2019). YouTube instructs its users in their civic duty, setting the terms of ideal user interactions by deploying the language of social responsibility. Both platforms appeal to users to be polite, to perform as responsible members of communities, emphasizing the wholesome, even 'family-friendly,' aesthetic that they seek to uphold. In order that the experience of the virtual world conforms to the aesthetic criteria of American bourgeois sociality, U.S. corporations and users assume, interactions must be strictly policed. In their conception of virtual platforms as social spaces in which affective bonds are formed, therefore, tech corporations create the conditions of possibility for content moderation.

If on the one hand, corporations represent these virtual spaces as a cultural ideal of sociality, on the other, cultural narratives often represent them as the end of democratic social relations as we know them. Phrases like the 'dark web' register fears about the unknown and 'savage' forces that lurk in the internet's unkempt spaces. TV shows like *Catfish* (2012-) or *To Catch a Predator* (2004-2007) stoke fears about the dangerous potential of unregulated social interaction. Moderators themselves experience the virtual world not as a 'safe environment,' but an endlessly hostile and 'uncivilized' space. In one of Adrian Chen's journalistic exposés, for instance, a former moderator explains: 'Think like that there is a sewer channel and all of the mess/dirt/waste/shit of the world flow towards you and you have to clean it' (Chen 2012). Without the careful attention of the moderators, the virtual world is far from the 'cool community' described by corporations; rather, it is described here as a vulgar space that *needs* domestication, maintenance, and care. Says one moderator, 'Nowadays, everybody has access to internet and if it is not controlled well, it becomes a porn factory' (*The Moderators* 2017). During her interview in *The Cleaners*, Google executive Nicole Wong alludes to this implication, explaining that when you are building a platform, 'You start with the question what's the vision for what should be on your platform. What isn't appropriate? What don't you want in your community?' (*The Cleaners* 2018) The social production of the internet as a nefarious space works to naturalize the desire for surveillance and therefore the necessity of content moderation. Not merely scenes of leisurely socializing and consumption, social media platforms are sites of domestication in which content moderators, equipped with surveillance technologies as well as the rules for interpretation, contain and neutralize the 'savage' passions and persons which threaten the safety, security, and emotional well-being of the platforms' users.

Like housewives' concerns about hiring 'foreign' domestics who were unprepared to meet the challenges of caring for American households, corporations and users register a nativist anxiety about 'outsourcing' the apparently necessary care work of moderation to foreign workers whose affections may lie elsewhere. U.S. third-party companies anticipate this anxiety by highlighting their workers' native-born status as a selling point, distinguishing themselves from 'foreign' moderation services who, they imply, are ill-equipped to develop quick and accurate interpretations of culturally specific content. One company's former slogan recommends: 'Outsource to Iowa—not India' (Roberts 2015 p. 32). A central preoccupation of *The Cleaners*, too, is moderators' inability to distinguish politically important but potentially inadmissible content from that which is in clear violation of corporate policy and cultural norms. The documentary stages the moderation process in Manila, asking experienced moderators to determine whether an image is in accordance with corporate guidelines. Among these images, moderators identify the iconic photographs of the 'Napalm Girl' and of an Abu Ghraib prisoner as images flagged for removal. Though the documentarians' broader point, one hopes, is that the corporate guidelines lack the ability to discern the nuances of cultural and social context, the 'foreign' moderators' complicity with guidelines, as well as their apparent ignorance in their performance of labor, remains another looming implication. As they narrate it, content moderation appears to demand not just emotional labor, but cultural affinity. Users and corporations expect that a worker perform their labor effectively as well as for the right reasons, out of love, care, and respect for the space and its occupants.

Designing social media platforms as virtual domestic spaces creates the necessity for digital care work, euphemistically described as either 'cleaning' or 'policing.' This metaphoric pervades even among scholars who liken moderators to 'cleaners,' 'janitors,' 'custodians,' engaged in the 'dirty work' of 'scrubbing' the internet; or otherwise figure them as 'snipers' or 'policemen,' those who 'enforce' laws, 'secure' borders and 'protect' citizens of the U.S. and Europe from all things 'evil' and 'suspicious' (Gillepsie 2018; Madrigal 2017; Roberts 2016; *The Cleaners* 2018; *The Moderators* 2017). And while the symbolic and metaphorical nature of these descriptors has been generally overlooked, under the pressure of scrutiny, and within the framework of 'imperial domesticity,' they appear neither arbitrary nor politically neutral (Kaplan 1998, p. 587). Taken together, they position workers within a racial order, enlisting them in the affective labor necessary for the maintenance of a pseudo-domestic space designed to further imperial power. By deconstructing the narrative production of cyberspace as a virtual domestic sphere, we can begin to imagine beyond labor relations that reproduce inequalities and advance imperial power.

Caring for the Internet

Reading content moderation as care work reveals that the trauma moderators endure is not merely an unfortunate consequence. Rather, it is a functional necessity of empire which seeks to secure the stability of its communities in order to extend the reach of its power. Neither natural nor inevitable, that moderators are tasked with absorbing all that is menacing in the virtual world is a condition made possible by the carrying forward of historically produced domestic labor relations and the imperial logic on which they rested. However, situating moderators within a 'global care chain,' a 'series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring,' recovers the set of relations in which these workers care (Hochschild 2000, p.

121). Such a project of critical recovery allows us to deconstruct the hierarchical relations that have long structured care work to imagine alternative solidarities. Users and moderators, after all, participate in the cultivation of affective bonds in different ways, but are no less a part of the same virtual space and ‘global community.’

Over the past decade, since Adrian Chen and other journalists began investigating content moderation, several confidential sources have leaked corporate guidelines and training materials used to instruct moderators (Koepler 2019; Newton 2019; Madrigal 2017; Chen 2012, 2014, 2017). These documents detail criteria used to delineate what constitutes permissible and illicit hate speech, violence, terrorism, or sexual content. Differently enforced around the world, these guidelines have changed to become more elaborate over time in response to cultural shifts and political pressures. Since the concept of content moderation is fairly new, and many of these technologies are developed and implemented in the absence of any legal regulation, its logistics have been constantly shifting. What this means for moderators, of course, is that the terms of their labor, too, are in constant flux. In spite of this, many third-party companies allow an extremely small margin of ‘error,’ demanding near perfect decision-making from moderators that must understand not only U.S. cultural, political, and social history to enforce guidelines, but also how these discourses are evolving in the present (Newton 2019). Whether they are housed in the U.S. or the Philippines, as the internet’s care workers, moderators engage in physical, mental, and emotional labor, all of which are entangled in the act of viewing, interpreting, and ‘clicking’ through user-generated content.

Moderators’ work is not only to bear witness to the deeply personal, disturbing evidence of human suffering, but remove evidence of its existence in order to sustain the emotional and psychic well-being of the virtual world’s other inhabitants. As one moderator puts it: ‘[You perform this labor] just for the people to think it’s safe to go online, when in fact in your everyday job it’s not safe for you’ (*The Cleaners* 2018). While emotional labor is perhaps exploitative by design, content moderation extracts this labor with a novel intensity. Though these virtual domestic spaces allow to connect persons and bring users together in a community, they forge no connections between the users and their moderators. Denied access to these social spaces, and even prohibited from socializing with each other, moderators are required to sign non-disclosure agreements that isolate them from even their co-workers. By abstracting moderators from any ‘global care chain,’ corporations burden moderators with long-term psycho-emotional effects as well as social alienation. And while corporations like Facebook have ostensibly attempted to improve the conditions under which moderators labor—exclusively in their U.S. offices—such attempts appear futile. By equipping offices with more counselors and providing increased screening for workers with ‘resiliency,’ who are best suited for the job, employers appear to mitigate against some of the most troubling aspects of content moderation. However, this attempt at redress assumes that the emotional labor of content moderators is a ‘necessary evil.’ The maintenance of the internet—and the sustainability of a profitable platform—demand that someone be traumatized.

In fact, corporations have begun reframing the emotional labor involved in moderation as a personal benefit and sign of workers’ inner strength. Reporter Casey Newton recounts an interview with a counselor at a content moderation firm in Phoenix: ‘When I ask about the risks of contractors developing PTSD, a counselor that I’ll call Logan tells me about a different psychological phenomenon: ‘post-traumatic growth,’ an effect whereby some trauma victims

emerge from the experience feeling stronger than before. The example he gives me is that of Malala Yousafzai, the women's education activist, who was shot in the head as a teenager by the Taliban' (Newton 2019). The counselor's sense that some persons have a greater emotional capacity to endure extreme forms of epistemological violence reads, of course, as absurd. Within the history of care work, however, this has been the status quo: like 'foreign' domestics who must assimilate to a cultural system which perceives them as inherently inferior, content moderators must subordinate their own epistemological and ontological orientation in order to support the 'safety' of a worldview that refuses to see them. What is more, his example of Yousafzai fetishizes racialized and feminized women as uniquely capable of sustaining emotional trauma or abuse, deploying the same rhetoric which justified the exploitation of immigrant, indigenous, and black domestic servants.

This prompts us to consider further how the kinds of emotional labor demanded of moderators depends on their subject positioning. Moderators in India, for example, confront the same beheadings and sexual violence as their U.S. counterparts, but must also negotiate vast and alienating cultural differences. Since they are required to make judgments quickly, in some cases maintaining a speed of 2,000 images per hour, it is essential that they internalize corporate regulations which attempt to construct the perspective of a common user from the U.S. or Europe. Adrian Chen's 2017 documentary, *The Moderators*, for example, takes place at an office in India where Hindu men and women are required to differentiate between forms of offensive and inoffensive nudity, identifying the image as permissible or pornographic. As their training manager acknowledges, viewing images of naked or near naked women is likely an alienating experience, since it may be deeply offensive to their personal, religious, and cultural beliefs. In this way, the work of content moderation extends the reach of U.S. cultural imperialism to act on individual subjectivities in a highly oppressive way. Asked to suppress their personal and social identities, moderators are required to forget themselves in order to keep intact the subjectivity of users in the U.S. and Europe.

Akin to the accent, affect, and cultural training that call center employees undergo, the demand to adopt a foreign worldview results in what A. Aneesh calls the 'disintegration of the self.' 'Although the story of globalization is often a story of integrations, connections, and flows,' he argues, 'it is difficult to ignore disintegrations, contradictions, and divides that constitute the experience of globalization to a similar degree' (Aneesh 2012 p. 528). The experience of global integration, which is to say, the experience of consuming 'safe' images of foreign cultures and worldviews from home, depends on the alienation of workers from their own social worlds and selves. Says one moderator, 'I'm different from what I am before. It's just like a virus in me where in it slowly penetrating in my brain and the reaction of my body is like I'm working as a moderator day to day and then I quit. I need to stop. There's something wrong happening' (*The Cleaners* 2018). The 'intrusions and interventions of body and person' involved in the labor of content moderation sustain a form of colonial intimacy between moderators and U.S. consumers, and are therefore illustrative of a powerful tactic of neoliberal global capital (Stoler 2006 p. 5).

Though it is this intimacy that presently sustains inequalities, it may also be a site of possible solidarity. The culturally imperialistic demand that moderators across the globe become acculturated to American and European political and social contexts forges, too, an intimacy between moderators and users, who both have a stake in international developments of all kinds.

These guidelines resonate, of course, with nineteenth-century domestication programs used to prepare immigrants to perform care work in the domestic sphere; however, they also have the consequence of constructing cultural links between moderators and users who are differently engaged in the production of public discourse and the content of virtual spaces. Implementing the criteria that Facebook sets for users in the U.S., for example, requires that moderators in India or the Philippines adeptly distinguish between forms of ‘white nationalism,’ ‘white separatism,’ and ‘white supremacy’—an interpretive distinction that even those living in the U.S. may fail to discern (Cox 2018). From this perspective, moderators share the burden of identifying neo-fascist rhetoric, learning with the users that they protect how these ideologies adapt to changing historical conditions. Moderators and users are differently empowered to shape the contours of political discourse online—users frequently issue demands on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube that result in policy changes; and moderators, though theoretically under the direction of corporations, nonetheless apply guidelines at their discretion. Seeing users and moderators within a ‘global chain of care,’ engaged in related immaterial and affective labor, encourages us to reconsider the role of moderators in digital social interactions.

The case of livestream content, which requires moderation to occur in real-time, represents another possibility of empathetic intimacy. Though the cultural and geographic distance between moderators and users is maintained, the demands of livestream moderation create a temporal proximity in which all bear witness to videos together and simultaneously. This instance of care work demands that moderators act quickly to take down livestream videos of suicides or terrorism in order to sustain other users’ experience of the platform as a ‘convivial and safe place’ (Hochschild 1983 p. 20). In recently leaked training materials, Facebook recommends that its moderators look out for ‘Warning Signs’ that signal a livestream video is likely to become impermissible content. Among these they list: ‘Evidence of human despair,’ such as ‘crying, pleading, [and] begging’ (Cox 2019). Moderators can act in these moments not only to protect the platform, but also the users offline. While this was not always the case, the recent terror attack in New Zealand, broadcast on Facebook Live, has prompted users to demand that moderators be empowered to enlist the support of law enforcement if it could save users’ lives. In fact, reportage of the attack has begun to recover the global care chain in which moderators labor, as journalists express empathy for the workers who, with the world, helplessly watched the livestream of a mass shooting. A source is reported as saying, ‘I couldn’t imagine being the reviewer who had to witness that livestream in New Zealand’ (Koebler 2019). Recognizing moderators as active participants in public discourse, as personally affected by global acts of violence, refutes their positioning as either empowered and threatening overseers, or lowly custodians in subordinated positions of service. Instead, we might begin to see them as agents actively participating in communities and intervening into the social lives of users, both online and offline.

Conclusion

In an effort to recognize content moderators and deconstruct assumptions as well as prevailing narratives which persist in describing their labor either as either a necessary evil, or of secondary importance to consumers’ interests, this essay has situated their labor in the history of domestic labor relations. In difference with scholarship that ‘attempt[s] to locate utopian potential in the forces of production...[by] idealizing women’s and reproductive work as spheres free from alienation and domination’ (Schultz 2006), I suggest that affective labor, including content

moderation, has historically occurred within coercive, hierarchical, and exploitative arrangements. That workers themselves are enlisted to do the labor which effaces their own conditions of possibility is not a coincidence, but a well-trod tactic, used by housewives who entreated their workers to self-discipline and self-efface, and by many others thereafter who capitalized on the exclusion of care work from dominant conceptions of labor. Recognizing content moderation as not just occurring within, but produced by, an imperial labor system, we can move beyond the question of improving the labor conditions of moderation, or securing 'freedom of expression' for users, and begin to consider how alternative alliances and intimacies may be forged.

With her project 'Offline-Online,' for instance, activist Jillian York has already begun making connections between the lived experiences of inequality by historically disenfranchised communities'offline' and the regulations imposed by corporations which restrict their capacity for self-representation 'online,' making infographics which hold these systemic violences side-by-side (Onlinecensorship.org). She suggests that the fact that, offline, 'Black Americans are 3x more likely to be killed by police than White Americans,' bears some relation to the fact that, online, 'In 2017, a coalition of 77 social and racial justice organizations wrote to Facebook about censorship of Facebook users of color and takedowns of images discussing racism' (Onlinecensorship.org). The alternative way of seeing content moderation that I have here proposed begs the question of how a project like York's would change if we more fully considered the potential for solidarity between exploited content moderators and the communities of consumers that are also systematically excluded from membership in Facebook's 'safe environment.'

Author Bio

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