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“NO OVERLY SUGGESTIVE PHOTOS OF ANY KIND”: TECHNICS AND NORMATIVITY IN SOCIAL NETWORK CONTENT MANAGEMENT POLICIES

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Abstract

This article examines the policies and practices that manage user-submitted content on three gay- targeted social networking services. While managing user-generated content is a common practice across social networking services, the policies implemented on gay-targeted services tend to be distinctively restrictive in scope and highly specific in formulation. This analysis identifies the technical, legal, and social affordances that authorized the creation of these policies. Framing content management policies as derived from the technical rules of platforms like Apple’s App Store obscures normative judgements about proper self-presentation and community formation. Identifying the normative character of these policies requires an analysis rooted simultaneously in technology studies, media policy, and subcultural identity politics.

Managing user-generated content online is a wide-reaching and frequently contentious activity. (Gillespie, 2010; 2012; van Dijck, 2009; 2013). This article examines the content management policies and practices of the three most popular gay-targeted social networking services: Grindr, Scruff, and Manhunt. Social networking services, including ones focused on romantic or intimate relationships, cut across gay and straight communities; but the policies in place to manage gay services are distinctive in their specificity. This article asks how these restrictive policies came to be authorized — both by application developers and by users themselves. In evaluating the relationship between policy and practice on these services, this study outlines both a model of content policies as their most specific, as well as a model for how the relationship between technical systems and subcultural practice should be conceptualized. Framing these content management policies as solely technical in origin obscures the value judgements that are embedded in them — value judgements that have particular valence in subcultural communities.

Content management policies rest at the nexus of three sets of standards: first, that which is lawful; second, the requirements of technical actors like Apple and Google; and third, that which application developers and designers deem *proper*, as determined

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outside of and beyond the external policies. The terms of service for Manhunt, Grindr, and Scruff (Grindr, 2012; Manhunt, 2009; Scruff, 2012) establish a broad class of content that is forbidden *within the context of these services*, regardless of other constraints. I argue that these policies constitute a normative declaration, although only a rarely-acknowledged one, that what laws and technical policies consider objectionable is, in some instances, not sufficient to govern online services.

The developers of both Grindr and Scruff emphasize the fact that their content guidelines are designed primarily to ensure compliance with the rules set forth by Apple and Google for developers on their respective mobile platforms. Developers remind their users that apps distributed through mainstream smartphone application clearinghouses require more restrictive content standards. The narrative presented to users is that, faced with the choice between not offering an application at all or abiding by Apple and Google's rules, developers have opted to limit the types of content available on their services for the users' benefit. This focus on externally imposed developer guidelines constitutes an important reframing of the discourse around content management practices. In particular, it shifts the responsibility for these policies off of application developers and onto Apple and Google. As Grindr's chief executive Joel Simkhai explains, "From day one, we basically used the App Store guidelines as a framework for development." The ambiguity of these guidelines, Simkhai continued, explains the Grindr staff's cautious development approach:

Apple and Google don't have very specific guidelines — sometimes they can be quite vague. Trying to make sense of them is often a Talmudic exercise, so when we drew up the Grindr profile guidelines, we were very conservative in our interpretation of Apple and Google's guidelines.

By focusing on the rules set forth by Apple and Google, Simkhai downplays the internal design process behind Grindr as a factor in developing content restrictions. The choices were made *for Grindr* by Apple and Google, rather than by Grindr's staff.

Apple's guidelines are fairly open-ended in their articulation of restrictions on user-generated content in apps:

We view Apps different [*sic*] than books or songs, which we do not curate. ...

We will reject Apps for any content or behavior that we believe is over the line. What line, you ask? Well, as a Supreme Court Justice once said, "I'll know it when I see it". And we think you will also know it when you cross it. (Apple, 2013)

The guidelines are more specific on the issue of pornography, noting that apps containing objectionable, crude, or patently pornographic material (user-generated or not) will not be distributed through the App Store. Google likewise notes that pornography, nudity, graphic sex acts, and sexually explicit material are all prohibited in applications distributed on Google Play (Google, n.d.). While frequently ambiguous, these policies do not, in themselves, prohibit the full spectrum of content addressed in the Grindr, Scruff, and Manhunt guidelines.

This gap between platform policies and specific app practices can be explained in two ways. First, these policies constitute an important and non-content-neutral restriction on developer behavior (Hestres, 2013). This is the most direct explanation of control: Apps constrain user behavior because Apple and Google specifically proscribe certain types of content. But, in practice, these restrictions tend to be considerably more restrictive than direct control can account for. Instead, these platform-wide policies can create a chilling effect on developer behavior: Rather than running the risk of violating platform rules, developers might elect to be more conservative in their specific policies. This is the explanation offered by Grindr, Scruff, and Manhunt. Few services, however, acknowledge their own normative interventions into this process: An important act of translation occurs between the Apple and Google developer policies and the rules users actually engage with. Herein, both platform curators like Apple and Google *and* application developers behave in a non-content-neutral manner.

The technical systems that frame these services obscure the relations of power encoded in them. Presenting a content policy as the product of technological requirements rather than normative ones reduces opportunities for user resistance and self-expression. Hiding certain types of sexuality from view on social networking services isn't to say that they don't exist; but diminishing their visibility is in itself a value judgement and an affordance for a particular and limited type of representation. These are normative considerations, not technological ones — considerations which have important consequences for the agency of individual users as well as the visibility of diverse practices and patterns of self-expression in gay communities. As social applications continue to become more prominent, particularly in subcultural communities, frameworks of values and norms will be indispensable in the design and management of technical systems. Technological and legal considerations alone are insufficient.

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