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PATROLLING SEXUALITY AND GENDER IN DIGITAL SOCIAL SPACES

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Abstract:

All social spaces are governed by rules, both spoken and unspoken. Gender and sexuality are especially subjected to policing and governance, both formally and informally. This panel presents four examples in which sexuality and gender are 'patrolled' in digital social spaces, through both explicit rules and implicit ideals: hook-up/dating app codes of conduct, informal digitally mediated sex education in Singapore, the circulation of pornography and 'sexual storytelling' on subreddit r/TotallyStraight, and boundary patrolling of memory and materiality in a trans and gender diverse (TGD) community in Adelaide. While we recognise a clear distinction between gender and sexuality we adopt a cross-platform and interdisciplinary perspective from which it is evident that negotiations over the boundaries are often fraught, causing blurriness between otherwise neat categories.

The first paper in this collection, draws on a trans and gender diverse (TGD) case study in social media storytelling. It explores the ways TGD participants patrol the boundaries of personal and familial archives, and the digital trace that affirms or counters shared
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memories. It considers the 'turf' wars that take place online between different stakeholders of material identity (including Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists or TERFS). Even individuals apparently united under the TGD acronym engage in disputes over collective representation and which strategies should be prioritised in pursuing legal reform. Regardless of a digital trace that can seem permanent and definite, memory and materiality are subjective frontiers that shapeshift in different contexts and with different perspectives. This paper argues that sophisticated negotiations undertaken by TGD people, particularly around coherence and congruence, demonstrate skills that constitute a kind of broadly applicable playbook for surviving modern networked sociality and civic engagement.

The second paper examines how Influencers act as informal, digitally mediated educators of sex and sexuality in Singapore. Institutionalized sexuality education in Singapore undertakes a conservative, medicalised approach that preaches abstinence, and is premised on promoting healthy (heterosexual) relationships between married couples for reproduction purposes, to uphold the stable family unit. It assigns parents, the school, students, and the community as stakeholders in maintaining a comprehensive sexuality education. However, young people are increasingly turning to Influencers who are trendy, clout rich, and influential on the internet for first-hand 'lifestyle' information and advice. In response, some Influencers use personal experiences of sex and sexuality to lure traffic and increase their viewership. Through ethnographic fieldwork conducted with these Influencers and content analysis of one specific Influencers' social media between December 2012 and July 2013, this paper examines how Influencers have stepped in as informal educators of sex and sexuality education to provide alternative approaches amidst a state-controlled hegemonic discourse.

The third paper centres on a case study of the 'Totally Straight' (r/TotallyStraight) 'subreddit' on social media site reddit. r/TotallyStraight serves as a web forum for sharing gay pornography amongst men who identify as straight, governed by a strict set of framing rules that determine what is and what is not appropriate in this space. This paper draws on a small-scale study of the r/TotallyStraight subreddit, conducted over a period of three months. Analysis reveals that while r/TotallyStraight is largely used as a forum for sharing porn depicting men, it also serves as a space for affirmation and sharing personal narratives related to contested 'mostly straight' sexual identities. The moderators of the subreddit, and the users themselves, foster a supportive, non-judgemental discourse in the telling of 'sexual stories' (Plummer 1995). It is argued that this phenomenon could be representative of broader cultural shifts towards less rigidly defined sexual identities, and that this case study points to the potentials for digital social spaces to act as sites for organising and affirming non-dominant identity-projects.

In the fourth and final paper discourses of hook-up/dating app rules and etiquette are considered, drawing from focus groups with same-sex attracted young people from Sydney. Unlike in other social network sites, user conduct cannot be publicly discussed on Grindr and similar apps since these offer no space for public interaction beyond static profiles. This ensures that one's 'rules of play' are developed through practice, and this encompasses ethical practices of self-formation (Foucault 1982) in which users

consider how their ethical conduct reflects or departs from the suspected 'norms' of a platform. The communicative limits of these apps also ensures that 'private chats' bleed into other spaces, with screen grabs commonly shared among friends and peers. In focus groups, users described these apps as unregulated, gave examples of improper use, and discussed their personal rules of engagement. Drawing from Foucault's work on pleasure and the ethical subject, this paper highlights the hook-up/dating app dual process of negotiating one's relation to self and others. Here, personal codes of conduct are recognised as unstable, yet are necessarily deployed for the app user's ethical self-formation.

Collectively these papers represent some fascinating ways in which definitions and performances of sex and gender are patrolled by people inside and outside of arbitrary boundaries. While previously these boundaries have appeared self-evident (e.g male, female, gay, straight, private, public, normal, variant etc.) these rich descriptions of networked social spaces reveal otherwise.

T(e)RF Wars: patrolling the boundaries of memory and materiality in the TGD community

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The Stories Beyond Gender Case Study

Over the last year a diverse and politicised group of TGD (trans and gender-diverse) people have been engaging in monthly workshops that explore the boundaries of gender identity in Adelaide, Australia. Their creative outputs are curated in an online gallery of memes, poems, artwork (produced with pencil, paper and digital tools) photo-taichi and video at www.storiesbeyondgender.com. They have also hosted a face-to-face Trans World Café as an experiment in facilitating conversations across difference, and travelled to regional centres to connect with geographically isolated TGD people. This initiative was conceived as a creative community development intervention that aims to address TGD peoples' over-representation in statistics on bullying, homelessness, drug abuse, depression and suicide (Smith et al., 2014). With funding from the SA Government Department of Community and Social Inclusion it bridges gaps between policy, research and everyday practices, as well as the tensions established in a small but vibrant gender-diverse community.

Patrolling Boundaries

While many young people ascribe to non-binary and fluid understandings of gender, an older generation have battled to achieve recognition in what are arguably quite rigid renditions of masculinity and femininity. Lateral violence among people with different understandings of transition, different amounts of social capital and privilege, and different understandings of gender expression is acknowledged as one of the obstacles to collective representation. The ways in which boundaries around memory, materiality and activism are patrolled demonstrates profound schisms in social understandings of gender and identity. In the face of the aforementioned dire social problems faced by TGD people this lack of wholly affirmed allegiance is a concern. On the other hand TGD people circumnavigate risk and harm (Livingstone, 2013) in some very interesting selective representations of self. TGD people seize opportunities for connection despite increasing exposure to context collapse. When things don't work out as they hope they demonstrate (and model) resilience.

Threaded through blog posts online and interviews with participants are themes of renegotiating memories of childhood and the material traces of previous as well as projected incarnations. Sometimes there are boundary wars between territory holders – between people supposedly unified under the 'transgender umbrella' about cross-dressing, gender-fluidity, stealth and sex reassignment surgery (SRS) etc; between doctor and lawyer over 'rights of the child'; between parent and child over pronouns and toddler photos - essentially canvassing how to be trans 'enough' Some TGD people nurse grudges against gay activists in exclusive lobby groups, another tells stories of gleefully taunting the TERFS (trans exclusionary radical feminists) in online forums.

Performing Fluidity for Affective Publics

Most people have experienced the slight shock brought upon by social convergence or context collapse (boyd, 2014). Attempting to hold in one's mind the multiple audiences for a single performance both now and in the future is well-nigh impossible. Internet researchers routinely build upon Goffman's analogy of front and back stage (1959) and Giddens' work on curated identity, to offer new theories about networked spaces and intimate citizenship. Papacharissi extends this corpus and argues for a routine construction of multiple selves, negotiated among networks as a core component of what she calls 'Affective Publics':

Friction and acquiescence are integrated into self-narratives, channelled into performances that are telling of both what we want to be and what we cannot be. (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 96)

Fundamentally, asserting the terms of one's own material existence, and the framing of one's memories is central in acquiring what I call 'curated congruence'. The most resilient of TGD people manage to do this by holding close their personal congruence and dismissing charges of incoherence or inauthenticity.

Personal Congruence

In the TGD community 'congruence' is often used to mean an alignment between how you see yourself and how others see you. For TGD people much emotional labour goes into aligning their chosen gender (sometimes referred to as 'true', or 'affirmed' so as to highlight a lack of choice) with the way they are 'read' or perceived by others. I draw a distinction between congruence and coherence, which is most often taken to mean a logical and consistent whole (as judged by others). Arguably, congruence is self-determined while coherence is a social determination.

Here I briefly draw on the experiences shared by two participants in the Stories Beyond Gender project, to illustrate how they manage their personal congruence in contested terrains of memory and materiality with different audiences both on and offline.

Lillith, 22, shares selfies across different platforms for distinct purposes. She updates her Facebook profile with a similarly framed selfie each month, partly for herself in order to observe subtle changes in soft tissue influenced by oestrogen and partly for her friends, so that 'they're kept in the loop' and are never unduly surprised by her changed appearance. Lillith also posts these selfies to a subreddit called 'trans-passing' that she describes as being full of 'hypercritical transphobic haters'.

She prefers this community's criticism of her physical appearance over the alternative: 'I'd rather they say "hey you look like a dude in a dress" rather than honey it up!'. In the early days of transition Lillith would post on the subreddit to see if she passed as a boy, because at that stage she still needed to attend family functions in her male assignation.

Joslyn, 25, provides still further evidence of the complex interweaving of digital self-representation over time-frames and multiple platforms and devices. Joslyn said she doesn't like selfies and only includes them in chat on Facebook to occasionally 'save words' or to describe something like a new hat. She acknowledges that she barely remembers what she looked like as a child because she doesn't keep personal

photographs, though notes 'my mum will never forget'. While she acknowledges that her material trace may still be searchable she nevertheless regards chat selfies as transient and prefers to characterize herself and her current thinking as manga-influenced colourful characters in graphic novel vignettes.

Conclusion

Curated congruence is largely conceptual, somewhat ideal, and occasionally at odds with real-life turf wars. On social media non-linear fragments of stories can be difficult to curate. Highly fraught, yet successful, journeys towards collective representation can also fall apart online. For TGD people who face the risk of physical violence in public spaces, lateral violence within the community and flaming online, there are many disincentives to social and civic engagement. This heightened awareness of contested gender identity (self and collective) is both a reason to seek online affirmation and a reason to highly curate and moderate online engagement.

TGD knowledge of the fluidity of memory, materiality and the digital trace underpins their daily uses of social media in everyday life, which assume context collapse and thereby challenge social injunctions to present coherence. TGD people model nuanced digital self-representation strategies and these skills constitute a kind of play book for surviving modern networked sociality and civic engagement.

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“There Are Literally No Rules When It Comes To These Things”

Paul Byron, University of New South Wales

Regarding social media platforms, McLaughlin and Vitak note how “New members of a group may struggle to learn group norms initially, especially when those norms are not codified” (2012, 301). This can be said of hook-up/dating apps that offer limited opportunity to watch and learn how one should interact. It is mostly through practice – chatting, arranging dates, or hooking up – that one can come to comprehend these norms.

A growing literature on same-sex hook-up/dating apps mostly focuses on sexual health risks or queer community practices, yet this paper offers a Foucauldian account of users’ personal rules of engagement and sexual ethics (Foucault 1986). I also discuss young people’s practice-based knowledges of using hook-up/dating apps, and how this is forged through various intimacies that include chatting and meeting through apps, discussing ‘codes of conduct’ with friends and partners, and sharing app-based encounters with peers. I draw upon focus group interviews with same-sex attracted young people (18-29 years) from Sydney, where participants discuss their personal rules of engagement. This reflects Foucault’s writings on ethical practice that is necessary to negotiate unwritten social rules, norms and expectations (1986).

Since the arrival of Grindr, user etiquette guidelines have been regularly published online. This indicates something particular about these platforms, in which public conversations about etiquette cannot be had on the apps itself, and where users cannot simply lurk and watch other interactions to figure out the communicative cultures of these spaces. To gain a sense of protocol, one must engage in communication with other users. The abundance of online etiquette guides also highlights our discomfort and uncertainties about how ‘Grindr’ works. This discomfort featured in focus groups, in which other users’ poor conduct was heavily discussed.

Through dual practices of consumption/production in media such as these, “watchers expect, and desire, to be watched” (Marwick 2012, 380). The practice and awareness of ‘lateral surveillance’ (Andrejevic 2005) on Grindr is made evident through Tumblr sites such as Douchebags of Grindr, where user behaviour is brought into question. Through a range of sites like this – where in-app profiles,

photos, and conversations are screen-grabbed and published – as well as the sharing of ‘private’ talk/photos between friends and peers, users are not only reminded that their profiles are judged and scrutinised by other users, but that their profiles and interactions could have broader audiences than anticipated.

In determining ‘proper use’ of hook-up/dating apps, focus group discussions illustrate a key tension in framing digital spaces as no different to non-digital spaces (i.e. the same rules and codes apply), and understanding these spaces as somewhat isolated from everyday practice, warranting a unique experience. Teasing out this discrepancy, user expectations are brought into question, as per the following example.

- Bec: Yeah but like, if you're on these apps there might be an expectation that you're in for the sex kind of thing.
- Lauren: Ready to fuck.
- Bec: You are DTF as the cool kids say these days, which would, sort of, there'd be an implied consent there.
- Lauren: But that makes everyone a whore.
- Ashleigh: But DTF with every single person on that application?

Bec's suggestion of implied consent to receive sexual messages is immediately questioned by Lauren and Ashleigh who question the feasibility (and morality) of users being sexually available to all other users. This implies a similarity to non-digital engagements, where sex must be negotiated more carefully, within social norms and expectations (e.g. sexual photos should not precede conversation).

Another example of this tension emerges in participants' discussions of harassment. The seriousness of these offences shifts depending on context, ranging from annoyance (e.g. unexpected photos), to feeling personally harassed (e.g. multiple unwanted messages), to feeling sexually harassed (e.g. being sent a cock pic on an all-female dating app). In the latter example, the photo and its sender not only break the rules of the app (as women-only), but are unlawful on account of being an unwanted sexual act. This discussion frames hook-up/dating app interactions as indistinct from spaces where physical bodies are co-present. Yet there are few penalties for any form of harassment in these spaces. In discussing harassment, participants particularly expressed desire for apps to better moderate user content and behaviour.

Along with the view that these spaces enjoy everyday life, participants considered how existing sexual cultures inform values and practices in hook-up/dating apps.

Josh: It all comes down to just the community as it is. Whether it be online, whether it be in person. It is very sexually orientated. So then you throw in apps that are specifically designed for sex and there's no rules. There are literally no rules when it comes to these things.

Participants deploy a range of tactics for managing the risks of using hook-up/dating apps. These include generating personal rules and processes for deciphering the authenticity of profiles, confining conversations and picture-sharing within these apps, following particular steps towards meeting other users off-screen, and carefully moving conversations to other platforms and offline spaces. It was noted that a lack of moderation by platforms themselves premises a greater need set one's own rules.

Tensions between the codes of conduct that participants expected and those they experienced can be considered in relation to moral codes and ethical practice (Foucault 1986). For Foucault, moral codes are associated with social understandings of how to behave, and these are deciphered and negotiated (and possibly rejected) through an individual's ethical practice. According to Foucault, ethical practice involves more than self-awareness, and encompasses the self-formation of the ethical subject (1986, 28).

In practicing self-formation, the app user is required "to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself" (Foucault 1986, 28). This is a creative space, where new intimacies are forged through one's negotiations of the socio-sexual codes, systems, and pleasure affordances of these media. As Kane Race notes, through hook-up app cultures and platforms, queer sexual relations are "taking new forms, assuming new genres and proceeding through new avenues in their encounter with digital media" (2015, 503).

That participants discussed app norms, rules, and conduct with ease highlights their practices of deciphering the moral codes of these sites. But participants also expected the codes to be transgressed, including by themselves. This reflects Foucault's argument that observance to codes and rules are often less important than the process of self-formation that takes place through rule-making in the face of moral questions and goals (1986). Evidently, the ethical work of setting agendas, boundaries, and expectations is more important to the ethical subject than adhering to a particular code of conduct.

As per focus group discussions, ethical practice requires self-work alongside our creative responses to new media environments. These are risky spaces - not because of the sexual encounters they organise, but because of the need to negotiate ethical conduct in a space with 'no rules'.

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Queer Influencers: Personal illustrations amidst repressive Sexuality Education

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Introduction

Institutionalized sexuality education in Singapore undertakes a conservative, medicalised approach that preaches abstinence, premised on promoting healthy (heterosexual) relationships between married couples for reproduction purposes to uphold a stable family unit. It assigns parents, the school, students, and the community as stakeholders in maintaining a comprehensive sexuality education.

However, young people are increasingly turning to Influencers who are trendy, clout rich, and influential on the Internet for first-hand 'lifestyle' information and advice. In response, some Influencers personal experiences of sex and sexuality to lure traffic and increase their viewership.

Through ethnographic fieldwork conducted with Influencers and content analysis of one specific Influencers' social media between December 2012 and July 2013, this paper examines how Influencers act as informal sex educators to provide alternative approaches amidst a state-controlled hegemonic discourse. This talk specifically focuses on "personal illustrations" as a strategy to reach out to queer young people through the case study of Influencer Peggy.

Sexuality education in Singapore

Sexuality education in Singapore is generally disseminated via education institutes regulated by the Ministry of Education (MOE). Among its goals are for students to inculcate virtue "premised on the heterosexual married couple forming a nuclear family as the basic unit of society, through the inculcation of positive mainstream values and attitudes about sexuality" (MOE, 2014a). On a practical level, students are taught about contraception and the prevention of diseases "from a health perspective" (MOE, 2014b). However, the focus of the programme is still very much focused on rejecting sexual advances and the repercussions of casual sex. The MOE focuses on "what homosexuality is and the current legal provisions concerning homosexual acts in Singapore" (MOE, 2014b) – same sex unions are not recognized in Singapore, and Section 377A of the Penal Code in Singapore criminalizes sex between men.

Charismatic activism

In Singapore, only a handful of Influencers have had their sexuality questioned on forums. A couple have responded to such speculation, but even so, only ambiguously acknowledged their homosexuality or same-sex partner in brief token moments. However, Peggy has been consistently and overtly featuring her partner and their lives in her social media content, in an aesthetic similar to Influencers who write about their heterosexual male partners.

Peggy first publically wrote about her confusion over being attracted to a same-sex person in September 2011. At the time, her blog already contained archives of her past two relationships with men. A month later, she wrote a heartfelt entry about how she met her female partner. The post contained intimate exchange from the long-time

friends including screenshots of Facebook Messenger conversations dating to February 2008. Peggy produced a narrative account of the uncertainty and frustration she felt towards the development of her feelings throughout the course of these years, and talked followers through her various stages of self-discovery.

Supportive comments from followers poured in during her coming out. More significantly, several followers wrote in (mostly anonymously) to share their own experiences and difficulties. Over the next few months, Peggy's blog inevitably became a site on which several users congregated to share in the joy of her new relationship. Those who were in seasoned same-sex relationships offered her support while others who were less experienced wrote to seek advice from Peggy and others. She had also become an agony aunt to a niche market in this time.

Since then, Peggy has been blogging about her experiences and resources available to her. For example, she has written about Oogachaga, a queer-friendly organization that provides counseling and support to gay and lesbian communities, and Pink Dot SG, an annual non-profit public event in support of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transsexual (LGBT) people in Singapore. As of February 2016, Peggy has wedded her same-sex partner and documented the legal, logistical, and emotional aspects of the experience for her followers.

Influencers as informal sexuality educators

Amidst Singapore's conservative approach towards sexuality education, Influencers have emerged – intentionally and incidentally – as thought leaders providing alternative discourses to sexuality education within their cohorts. In contrast to the overtly disciplinary, pragmatic, and prescriptive (Haywood, 1996) model of sexuality education regulated by the state, Influencers provide more receptive informal modes of learning, which are “spontaneous” (Eshach, 2007, pp. 173).

Informal sexuality education includes all sources of sex-related information and influence a person receives apart from the syllabus disseminated within the classroom (Spanier, 1976). In this particular route of informal learning where Influencers role models replace authoritative didactic figures, readers are also “motivated intrinsically” (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson in Eshach, 2007, pp. 173) given that they exercise agency in seeking their reading material and imitating the sexual scripts they wish to pursue.

As one successor of contemporary women's magazines, it is tempting to brand Influencers' blogs as mere trashy, raunchy, or frivolous media. The ‘confessional’ trope of Peggy's personal illustrations, as a mode of ‘unmasking’ one's personal sex life, also bears a “normalizing function” against which “‘bad’ sex [or bad beliefs about one's sexuality] can be corrected” (Yang, 2004, pp. 516). In addition, exposure to Influencers' blogs cultivates particular depictions of women, femininity, and sexuality as “normative, expectable, and acceptable” (cf. Basnyat & Chang, 2014, pp. 83).

Queer Influencers

The highly personalized narratives offered by Peggy present the ‘sex talk’ message as intimate and accessible, and differs from the moralistic staple of formal sexuality

education and the explicitly commercial and bland framing of mainstream advertising formats. The resources shared, although freely available and searchable on the web, are not promoted in the mainstream educational syllabus. Personal voices on the struggles of coming out also do not feature in the hegemonic discourse of mainstream sexuality education, although schools provide counselling services for students who indicate that they are struggling with these issues.

The level of intimacy and insight that Peggy offers through her narrative accounts of her self-discovery and relationship as they unfold invites these sidelined others to partake in a conversation and community of support. The informal networks that Peggy has (inevitably) developed over time premise her as the main node of information dissemination. Unlike the hard and fast FAQs available on most LGBT support websites, Peggy delivers information about external LGBT support agencies by interweaving them into her personal journey, thus delivering sexual literacies effectively via the charismatic blog persona she has built up.

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'Totally Straight': Contested sexual identities and sexual storytelling on social media site reddit

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This paper is centred on a case study of the 'Totally Straight' (r/TotallyStraight) 'subreddit' on social news site reddit. r/TotallyStraight serves as a forum for sharing gay pornography amongst men who identify as straight. I draw on a small-scale study of the r/TotallyStraight subreddit, conducted over a period of three months, during which time 186 'posts' were analysed. Analysis reveals that while r/TotallyStraight is largely for sharing porn depicting men (still images, GIFs, and videos), it also serves as a space for affirmation and 'telling sexual stories' (Plummer 1995) related to contested 'mostly straight' sexual identities.

The category of the 'mostly heterosexual' emerges at a time of heightened awareness of sexual identities that do not fit into neat categories like gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Savin-Williams and Vrangalova (2013: 85) have argued for the existence of a 'mostly heterosexual' orientation: 'a touch of homosexuality without losing or decreasing their heterosexuality... mostly heterosexuals call into question the traditional three-group system of assessing sexual orientation'. r/TotallyStraight operates as an example of this phenomenon. Further, McKee, Albury and Lumby (2008) point out that for queer porn consumers, there is a process of re-affirmation in consuming non-hetero porn. One of their participants explains, 'porn sort of gives you this erotic charge but also reaffirms you've got this sexual identity involved with another bloke - there's this sexual action you can do'. Thus, r/TotallyStraight serves as both a site for exchanging pornography, but also as a site for telling and consuming sexual stories.

r/TotallyStraight operates under an enforced set of rules: 'this sub is for guys who identify as straight but get off to gay porn, every gender and sexual orientation is welcome here' and 'no one gives a shit if you think we might be bi-sexual or gay. Any shaming or trying to "convince" someone you believe is gay or in "denial" will result in comment removal and you'll likely be banned' ('r/TotallyStraight', March 2016). These rules work to shape both the content posted and discussion threads.

In the longer version of this paper, I explore in detail my findings around the content posted to the subreddit, which was 84% 'explicit' or 'Not Safe for Work' (NSFW) and 16% 'Non-Explicit' (SFW). In this short paper, however, I will focus on a discussion of 'NSFW labour' and the telling of sexual stories. The 'NSFW labour' involved in posting content to the subreddit is performed by a minority of users.

While there were over 15,000 redditors subscribed to r/TotallyStraight at the time of my analysis, only 74 different redditors posted to the subreddit during the study. 73% of the redditors who posted to r/TotallyStraight during data collection only posted once. The remaining 23% posted more than once, and three redditors posted more than ten times.

The other kind of labour discovered in my analysis was 'source requests'. Source requests came in the form of comments on still images or GIFs, asking where the images were taken from or the names of the men represented. 38% of the posts recorded during the study contained some kind of source request. Over half the time

(56%) source requests were answered, by either providing a link to a full video or by providing the name of the actors and/or production house behind the video from which the image was taken.

The most compelling finding was the presence of posts detailing personal narratives. These were text-only posts where redditors disclosed stories of (purportedly) their own sexual activities, anxieties, and experiences navigating a 'mostly straight' sexual identity, sometimes several thousand words long. While they were rare (5 posts, <3% of the overall corpus) these personal narratives brought a different dimension to the subreddit, distinct from the visual porn that dominated it. These narratives revealed complicated processes of identity-work and experimentation, as narrators skirted around what was 'acceptable' for straight men when pursuing their not-so-straight desires, seeking (and always receiving) validation and advice. While there was no way to confirm these stories as true, they nonetheless serve as compelling texts in better understanding the 'mostly straight' phenomenon.

Plummer (1995) theorised that when it comes to telling sexual stories, there are 'tellers', 'coaxers', and 'consumers' (105-106). While people may move between these different roles, the 'products', those 'social objects (texts), which harbour the meanings that have to be handled through interaction,' (106) are at the core. The meanings of these texts are, for Plummer, never fixed, but rather 'emerge out of a ceaselessly changing stream of interaction between producers and readers in shifting contexts and social worlds... meaning is a problematic emergent that is contextually based' (p. 106). Only a small number of redditors assumed the role of tellers (.5%) if users who post are the primary tellers. However, the nature of reddit is such that it is not only the 'original posters' who tell the story, but those who comment become part of that story (van der Nagel 2013). This digital entanglement complicates the dynamic between Plummer's (1995) tellers, coaxers, and consumers.

The role of the coaxer is fulfilled on r/TotallyStraight in three ways. First, the subreddit – and perhaps the moderators themselves – invite (and thus 'coax') stories, be they pornography or more elaborate personal narratives. Second, the redditors requesting the source of particular images or GIFs (seeking the 'full video', for instance) could also be read as coaxers. Third, those redditors who upvote content could similarly be read as coaxers, as they reward (and further surface) certain content. The role of the consumer on r/TotallyStraight is a more open one, and indeed all subscribers and more casual visitors to the subreddit who are not subscribers can be read as consumers. At the same time, any single consumer is able to fulfil the role of coaxer or indeed teller, given the nature of reddit. Unlike the sexual stories Plummer was interested in, redditors do not need to convince a book publisher or a television producer to authorise their voices to speak about particular sexual desires or traumas. In this sense, reddit provides a space for these narratives to play out in a networked public far beyond the slow momentum of traditional media discussed by Plummer (1995). In turn, exercising these stories here can lead to identity-work in a social context (with input and support from likeminded others, as in the case of both personal narratives described in the previous section) that are not reliant on the zeitgeist of the day; before, in Plummer's terms, 'a community has been fattened up' (1995: 116) to a story.

The conceptual category of 'mostly straight' or 'mostly heterosexual' proposed by Savin-Williams and Vrangalova (2013) is productive for thinking through what r/TotallyStraight might tell us about non-dominant sexual story telling in a broader, 'confessional society... cluttered with sexual stories' (Plummer 1995: 102). The notion that men can actively consume gay pornography and still retain a straight identity troubles neat boundaries and hegemonic rules around sexualities, and the 'rules' that govern this subreddit actively promote that troubling.

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