"TUMBLR TOLD ME…": THE POLITICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL SIGIFICANCE OF CONCEPTUALIZING SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AS LIVING ACTORS

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This paper takes up the question of how "platform" can be understood when it comes to studies of digital discourse. I posit that this is an empirical and ethnographic question, rather than a purely theoretical one. Regardless of how scholars theorize social media platforms, the people interacting with those technologies already have their own emic conceptualizations of what that technology is and how it functions — and those understandings shape their social media experiences. This paper aims to explore the stakes of such local conceptualizations. I argue that many of tumblr.com's most active users conceptualize the social media platform as a living actor, a dynamic and agentive figure with whom these young people interact. Attending to this particular understanding of Tumblr-as-actor is crucial because it has so intimately shaped the processes by which my research participants have come to take up new political-ethical commitments and identities through their engagement with the platform. Accordingly, I suggest that new methodological approaches for the study of digital discourse are required if scholars are to truly take seriously an understanding of platform as agentive figure.

The arguments in this paper emerge from ethnographic research conducted from 2013-2018 among a network of 208 young bloggers who credit Tumblr with shaping, as one research participant put it, "like all of my politics and morals and views about what the world should be like". I bring together participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, and "behind-the-screen" video journals to trace the political and methodological significance of conceptualizing Tumblr as an actor.

I see studies of digital discourse as predominantly built on two distinct understandings of what a social media platform fundamentally is and how it functions: 1) platform as a technology that organizes communication, where interactions occur *on* a social media

platform; and 2) platform as a technology that mediates and transforms communication, where interactions occur *through* a social media platform. Speaking to the first, scholars describe how social media platforms facilitate communication across temporal and spatial boundaries (Baron 2013); create virtual spaces to "inhabit" (Angouri & Sanderson 2016); function as a semi-public "fish bowl" space where unseen audiences can observe and contexts are flattened (Chayko 2008; Marwick & boyd 2011); and generate novel formations of connection (Zappavigna 2011). Scholarship building on the second understanding explores how platforms provide a range of constraints and affordances that can be taken up to achieve familiar interactional goals (West & Trester 2013), make certain linguistic practices more visible or easily accomplished (Squires 2014), and sometimes even create seemingly entirely novel linguistic phenomena.

I argue, however, that neither of these understandings of platform reflect how my research participants discursively frame Tumblr. Tumblr is articulated neither as a technology that organizes communication nor as a technology that transforms communication, but rather as a technology that participates in communication. They describe themselves as communicating not on, not through, but *with* Tumblr. In these young people's narratives, Tumblr is discursively constructed as a person who directly acts upon and interacts with them. The platform is addressed directly ("you need to chill, Tumblr!"), described as having agency and influence ("tumblr made me think about a lot of things but mostly social justice and my eyebrows"), and portrayed as author and interlocutor ("Tumblr says…", "Tumblr told me"). Despite being authored by single user among millions, content circulating the platform is consistently attributed to and engaged with as if "Tumblr" were a singular actor — an imagined figure composed of a cohesive set of qualities. Scholars of the internet have done careful and essential work in questioning undifferentiated imaginaries of social media platforms in our analyses, arguing instead for analytic approaches that move away from exactly the sorts of understandings of platform my research participants are articulating (Akkaya 2014; Miller 2016). Yet Tumblr is regularly cast as a singular and significant character in the narratives that many of its most active users tell. To ignore that would fail to capture an integral element of their experiences. Those very same constructs that academics productively challenge are nevertheless constructs that often have meaning and are of consequence for people's engagements with social media. I argue that through linguistic practices of alignment and disalignment with the imagined figure of "Tumblr", my research participations utilize this conceptualization of platform as a living actor, one characterized by a particular set of beliefs and behaviors, to articulate their own political-ethical commitments and identities.

This understanding has further implications for methodological approaches to studying digital discourse. Joel Sherzer points out that "the context" of discourse includes "the immediate, ongoing, and emerging actualities of speech events" (1987: 296). This raises the question: what constitutes the emergent actualities of a speech event in online contexts where discourse unfolds asynchronically, but is nevertheless experienced by interlocutors in an embodied moment? I argue that within a framework where a platform is understood as a living actor, it is the interaction between user and platform that constitutes the speech event. However, one of the key conundrums of digital discourse analysis is the researcher often only has access to what is on their own screen. Newsfeeds unique to each individual mediate the use of most new social media

platforms, replacing earlier structures where visitors shared the same view. The content on a user's public-facing page is therefore an increasingly inadequate window into their interactions. To address this, I argue for the use of audio-visual screen capture technologies that concurrently record the content on a screen alongside the bodies of users themselves for analyzing such interactions. I suggest that multimodal discourse analysis facilitated by such technologies can reveal the in-the-moment production of the speech event — the interaction between user and platform.

This paper does not argue for defining all social media platforms as living actors. Rather, I aim to show that regardless of how scholars theorize social media platforms and other technologies, people hold their own folk theories about the technologies they use and those theories shape their actions and experiences. This paper provides a case study for the empirical, theoretical, and methodological importance of taking such emic understandings seriously.

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