THE DIGITAL CLOSET: PLATFORM CENSORSHIP AND LGBTQIA+ INDEPENDENCE ONLINE

Alexander Monea
George Mason University

This paper draws on research for my forthcoming book – *The Digital Closet: How the Internet Became Straight* from MIT Press – to examine the coders, data, algorithms, and policies that govern the circulation of content on internet and technology platforms like Google, Facebook, Apple, and Amazon. I argue that these platforms are increasingly embedding heteronormative and cisnormative bias into their algorithms, datasets, and policies that are censoring LGBTQIA+ speech across the internet. This presentation combines archival studies, discourse analysis, platform studies, and critical code studies to piece together an analysis of what is going on inside the proprietary software at Google and Facebook in particular.

The first section of the paper draws on scholarship on Silicon Valley culture and 'toxic geek masculinity' to analyze the endemic heteronormativity and cisnormativity at work in tech culture. I connect these critical-analytical scholars to data from the Department of Labor produced during a protracted legal battle of sexist hiring and retention practices at Google, testimonials from former Google employees, and informal surveys and screen captured conversations in the wake of James Damore's infamous 'Google memo' circa 2017. By reading across these various sources I develop an understanding of Google's work culture as having deeply embedded normative understandings of gender and sexuality that are directly connected to the company's repeated failure to anticipate and meet the needs of LGBTQIA+ users.

The second section of the paper draws on original investigations into the benchmark datasets that Google used to develop its image recognition algorithms (like the GoogLe Net algorithm behind Google Photos and SafeSearch). I provide examples from WordNet and ImageNet to demonstrate the substantial heteronormative and cisnormative biases that are embedded in these datasets and provide some examples of the ways in which these biases are amplified once they are learned and applied by machine learning algorithms like the convolutional neural networks used for computer vision and image recognition tasks.

The third section of the paper draws on original investigations into Facebook's content moderation policies by performing close readings of its Community Standards Enforcement Reports, documents from its Product Policy Forum (previously called the Content Standards Forum), and leaked documents obtained by investigative journalists. Throughout this analysis I demonstrate the systemic heteronormative and cisnormative bias that structures Facebook's community standards and content moderation efforts on the platform and connect them directly to its attempts to produce "human algorithms" through outsourced digital piecemeal labor.

In closing, I argue that while less definitive than desirable due to the proprietary nature of platform code, these analyses demonstrate a substantial heteronormative and cisnormative bias across some of the most popular internet platforms in the world. As they increasingly dominate web traffic, they begin to structure our very experience of the internet, inflecting it in a heteronormative and cisnormative way. In so doing, they are damaging the capacities the internet might otherwise have for LGBTQIA+ independence and the fostering of community building, social organizing, sex education, and the exploration of non-normative erotics and desires online.