SORRY, BUT...: PLATFORM APOLOGIES, ABUSE, AND CONSTRUCTING THE CULPABLE SUBJECT

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Introduction

Apologies have become a prominent feature of online platforms' corporate communications. Whether in response to instances of harassment, security lapses, or political manipulation, official expressions of remorse or regret—often coupled with vows to "do better"—work to reconcile or recover a platform's commitments in the face of public relations, economic, or regulatory pressure.

Despite their prominence, however, apologies have received comparably less critical attention in research on harassment and abuse than other corporate responses, for example changes to moderation policies (e.g., Gibson, 2019; for an exception, see: Hall, 2020). In this work, we offer an analysis of three high-profile apologies: former Reddit CEO Ellen Pao's July 2015 apology for missteps in addressing the site's abusive climate; Riot Games' 2018 apology for hostility and sexual harassment at the company; and Twitch's June 2020 apology in response to allegations that some streamers had engaged in offline sexual harassment. Throughout our analysis, we pay particular attention to how apologies 1) construct and reproduce particular platform ideals and actors and 2) distribute or assign culpability for harassment and abuse.

Background

Online platforms are central to discussions of harassment and abuse, often accused of facilitating it, failing to do enough to stop it, or unevenly enforcing their terms of service. In the face of these and other controversies, public apologies and expressions of remorse by online platforms and their representatives—what we call "platform apologies"—have become a staple of technology company communications. For online platforms, public apologies seek to address and reconcile instances of harm or violence

that threaten (or, worse, reveal as empty) the values, ideals, and commitments through which a platform constructs and maintains its credibility—for instance, with users, investors, or regulators.

In this way, apologies constitute a "discursive performance" (Gillespie, 2019, p. 45-47) that reproduces a given platform's ideals after encounters with the messy and sometimes violent social realities of its production and use. Notable examples include Twitter ex-CEO Dic Costolo's leaked 2015 admission that "we suck at dealing abuse" (Tiku & Newton, 2015) and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's "many mea culpas" (Proferes, 2018). Such routine corporate apologies have become so ubiquitous that they have fueled an entire genre of satire centered on "fauxpologies" (Nguyen, 2019).

More than hollow rhetoric, however, platform apologies are central to the construction of platforms' social and political legitimacy. As feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2014) has shown, apologies and attendant expressions of shame, regret, or remorse are integral to the reproduction of cultural ideals and social hierarchies. By exhibiting remorse, dominant subjects—from individuals to the state—can perversely convert the failure to live up to an ideal into a successful realization of that ideal. For example, platforms that inflict or enable harm are often able to convert failure (i.e., harm) into success by expressing remorse; after all, one could not be remorseful unless one was committed to not inflicting harm in the first place. By apologizing, "a subject can demonstrate they are ideal subjects"—that is, a subject that holds the ideals that necessitated an apology (Ahmed, 2014, p. 109).

Method

Whereas research in rhetoric has focused on the structure of corporate/official apologies generally (e.g., Scher & Darley, 1997; Villadsen, 2008), we use discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2008) for its attention to language in context and, in particular, its role in constructing social actors and cultural values, defining their relationships, and assigning responsibility. By narrowing our analysis to three statements, we are able to account for each one in context; practically, it allows for richer description of the context and dynamics of the events that both precipitated and followed each apology.

Preliminary Findings

As with official and corporate apologies broadly, platform apologies set normative expectations; they "tell us what to avoid and what to strive for" (Villadsen, 2008, p. 33-34). They reflect "shared values" that the platform, employees, and users are either expected to have, or is under pressure to reinforce—whether from government, activists, or users. Though a full discussion is outside the scope of an extended abstract, two early thematic findings are worth mentioning: empowerment and individual responsibility. Invariably, platforms turn to the language of individual empowerment and control to convey these values, as when Riot Games expressed a desire to make community members "feel safe and empowered to raise issues" or when Pao introduced new tools to give Reddit mods more control over site policies.

Despite the appeal to shared values, the language of empowerment often constructs culpability in uneven ways. For example, the onus for fixing hostile communities is subtly but significantly displaced onto the end user, naming them as the agents who are best-situated to employ the tools given to them by the platform (as with new tools for reporting issues). Thus, a field of action is created that heavily weights the additive acts of monadic individuals rather than the multiplicative power of moderators, employees, users, or actors in context. In this way, companies that build and maintain online platforms use apologies to reassert an order of responsibility that subtly offloads their own—or, as Kimberly Hall (2020) describes, apologies function as "a way to recapture [narrative] control" (p. 1) by converting incidents of controversy or harm into successful reproductions of ideals of individual responsibility.

Conclusion

In prescribing action, these apologies offer rhetorical insight into the ways platforms and their purveyors conceive of, arrange, and assign responsibility to different actors and features of a site, including (but not limited to) different kinds of users, designers and developers, and technical features of a platform. Accordingly, platform apologies can be read as contact points with reality that reveal something crucial about both platforms' cultural functions and the values they claim to hold—annular rings in the ongoing development of platforms as they navigate threats to their legitimacy and social, political, or economic position. A discourse analysis approach exposes the individualism at the heart of these apologies—a close fit with a broader neoliberal vision of corporate governance that takes individual empowerment and responsibility as an axiomatic solution to collective and distributed social problems.

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