COLONIZING THE NARRATIVE SPACE: UNLIVABLE LIVES, UNSEEABLE STRUGGLES AND THE NECROPOLITICAL GOVERNANCE OF DIGITAL POPULATIONS

Kelly Lewis
Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, and Emerging Technologies Lab, Monash University

Introduction

Social media provides a critical space for people at the margins and living within domains of excessive struggle to document, publish, and share content that publicizes instances of human rights violations, conflict, and dispossession. This presentation explores how asymmetrical content moderation processes, opaque platform policies, and alternative enforcement systems that are brokered through backdoor corporate-government agreements lead to the removal of this content and re-obscure life and death struggles. I introduce the notion of *platform necropolitics* (Lewis, 2023, forthcoming) and demonstrate its theoretical resourcefulness through an examination of corporate-government social media censorship of pro-Palestinian content during the May 2021 Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Platform necropolitics manifests through the sovereign logics of platforms that violently police the boundaries of speech and space – determining who has the right to speak and who has the right to appear as a legitimate digital citizen, and who does not – and that take as their object the articulations of digital subjects and enact their 'right to kill or let live' (Lewis, 2023, forthcoming). This conceptual framework draws together scholarship from platform studies, political theorizing, and decolonial critique to reorientate critical theorizing of platforms as technologies of necropolitical power to rethink and imagine the implications of their discursive, material, and geopolitical interventions.

Beyond the politics of Platforms: Platform Necropolitics

Scholars of platform studies have long documented the profoundly political ways that platforms curate and mediate the contours of public discourse by policy and by design (Gillespie, 2018, 2010; Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019; Suzor, 2019; Roberts, 2019; Klonick, 2018). Governments are becoming more sophisticated in monitoring and controlling the information flow of citizens and increasingly pressure platforms to use

automated tools to govern and moderate what citizens can access, share, and ultimately do (Suzor, 2019, p. 79). Both human and automated forms of content moderation are well understood as opaque and controversial processes. Increasing forms of algorithmic moderation stand to further exacerbate levels of obscurity and complexity into the decision-making processes of what gets moderated in the name of security and safety (Gorwa et al., 2020) and specifically those made around content highlighting issues of political importance and human rights issues (York, 2021). Contentious images that expose instances of political discontent and human rights violations have been one of the primary weapons that oppressive governments seek to censor. The conditions under which who is seen and unseen, under what terms, holds a mirror onto more far-reaching forms of power and inequality (Benjamin, 2019, p. 99). Gillespie (2018, p. 12) is convinced that most of the challenges platforms face in their content moderation processes are structural. The premise of this presentation is there remains a need to move beyond the structural bounds and interior politics of platforms.

I place scholarship on the politics of platforms in conversation with Mbembe's (2019; 2003) post-colonial theory of necropolitics, to reimagine necropolitical power as manifested in the contemporary present through the digital infrastructures and mediating logics of platforms as spaces that we live *with*, *in*, and *through* today. Platform necropolitics prescribes an actionable language to speak to emergent and troubling developments of digitally mediated violence: when platforms exercise the power to effectively let digital subjects live or to kill contentious content and voices of dissent. This manifests in various situations, especially when platforms work in coordination with governments to expedite the removal of content deemed 'offensive', 'graphic' or 'inciteful', particularly those which are legitimate forms of political expression and do not violate platform policies or community guidelines. This has specific consequences for freedom of expression and human rights investigations as it governs the conditions for whose voices and what content are (or are not) given the right to life online. It is a phenomenon that demonstrates not only the unequal imparting of power on often already oppressed and marginalized people, but which also governs the conditions under which we see, understand, and remember conflict and revolt and has severe implications for the shaping of political futures.

Methods
This case study draws on primary research, critical journalistic accounts of content moderation during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict between 7 and 21 May 2021, and a critical textual and discursive analysis of a seven-month digital ethnographic study of public pro-Palestinian accounts (N=85) manually collected through a snowballing technique on Instagram between 7 May and 30 December 2021. I collected the ongoing digital traces of censorship and contestation articulated by people who called out and documented unjust forms of content moderation. This data collection shows myriad examples (via screenshots, N=324) of automated misclassification, unjustified removal of content and disabling of accounts on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, and the blocking of features on Instagram, such as story highlights, liking, sharing, or saving content, live video streaming, hashtags, or restricting access to accounts.

Findings and discussion
Preliminary findings reveal how platforms, like Facebook and Instagram, reaffirm the centrality of Western imperialism through their "commercial colonialism" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 10) in ways that simultaneously extend the "digital militarism" (Kuntsman and Stein, 2015, p. 6) of the Israeli state, and reenergize forms of necropolitics and necropower that enable for the reproduction of ordinary social existence of desirable digital citizens while simultaneously enacting apartheid-like architectures on undesirable 'others' that differentially orients certain populations toward spaces of irreproducibility, nonexistence, and social death. The gradually extending intertwinement of violent Israeli colonial occupation and the commercial imperialism of Western platforms reveals far-reaching and draconian implications for digital human rights and claims for sovereignty.

The analysis raises important implications for Internet researchers. So far much of the literature has focused on the structural elements of platforms (i.e., infrastructure, commercial logics, policies, and moderation processes). While important work, there remains a need to move beyond the interior politics of territorially bounded platform spaces to examine how this correlates with the exterior politics of nation-states. Particularly where automated content moderation is concerned, and especially when platforms enjoy opaque agreements with foreign governments and enact decisions at the behest of state and political actors.

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