Tumblr Meta-Fandom: Reflections and Repair

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The eminent "death of Tumblr" has been forecasted at least since the social platform was first purchased by Yahoo! in 2013 for $1.1 billion; then again when it was acquired by Verizon-Oath in 2017. Verizon subsequently banned pornographic content from the platform in December 2018, and again the end of Tumblr was predicted. Users joked that Tumblr's ownership was simply too incompetent to continue on (Sybert, 2021). Producing, distributing, and curating pornographic content, particularly queer pornographic content, had long been embedded in Tumblr practice (see Cho, 2015; McGlotten, 2020; Tiidenberg 2014, as examples). Then, less than a year after Verizon "banned" porn, Tumblr was again sold to Automattic (best known for the blogging platform WordPress) for a reported $3 million. Given that Tumblr was founded in 2007, users have been discussing the imminent demise of the platform for more than half of its digital lifespan.

Drawing from qualitative interviews with nine active Tumblr users conducted in the Fall/Winter of 2021-2022 and qualitative multimodal analysis of high-circulation "popular" Tumblr posts, this research assesses and analyzes transformations in user attitudes towards Tumblr three years on from Verizon's porn ban, and immediately prior to and following additional attempts to restrict adult content enacted by Automattic. In an effort to de-center white European and North American narratives, interview participants range from diverse ethnic and national positions, six of the nine interviews are with minority and multi-racial participants, participants from South American nations, and Turkey.

Specifically, this research considers iterations of what Tiidenberg, Hendry, and Abidin (2021) have labeled Tumblr's meta-fandom, or fan practices centered around Tumblr's cultures and communities themselves, rather than a more traditional media property. I consider these practices through the lenses of reflective nostalgia (Boym, 2001) and repair (Jackson, 2014) as a way of contending with both the recounting of a place and time on Tumblr that the users themselves know never really existed and the desire to acknowledge that Tumblr always has been "broken" but users continue to thrive, even in the wake of declining overall usage.

Interview participants saw the 2018 porn ban as a temporal marker signaling a perception of before and after. Many described a very similar trajectory following the ban that ultimately lead to a more pleasant overall experience in 2021. Participant Vera noted that by 2018 "[Tumblr] was garbage, full of hostility and anger and people saying stupid shit and then getting angry when they were proved wrong. It wasn't a good place to be, but most of us were reluctant to leave anyway." While she also discussed her frustration regarding the porn ban, she concludes "It's weird to think of now, but if you look at the current social media landscape, Tumblr is the best and chillest by *far.*" Participant Mal similarly reflected that "i think there have definitely been changes and a lot of them aren't good. […] i think a lot of the more positive community that came about after this point did so much later in a kind of mutual hatred for the circumstance but finding the humor in it and being unwilling to leave to different platforms entirely... and i feel like it's been a lot more recent that people are agreeing that the censoring and surveillance on a lot of other sites is worse so we want to stick with what we've got." Participants maintained a sense of "past Tumblr" but it was hardly an uncomplicated one.

Participants did not believe that removal of adult content itself lead to improved conditions on Tumblr. Explicitly, many were deeply concerned with sex workers who had used Tumblr for promotion and were now no longer able to use their blogs effectively. Rather, they found that long after the initial anger and exodus of users after the porn-ban, Tumblr's communities had stabilized into a more hospitable environment. With the decline in userbase, they generally found engagement to be lower, but less hostile or, as Vera noted, "chill."

When discussing Tumblr prior to the porn ban, there is little desire to return to the state of how things once were, or what Boym (2001) labels restorative nostalgia, a nostalgia that considers itself to be truth of the past. Participant Andrew summarizes the current state of Tumblr as "I think tumblr had become a little more self aware, maybe? There's always been self-referential jokes but now I think you really see it crystallized, like "back before the mass exodus" feeling like old-timers telling the children about history." As much as long-term users might share meta-fandom stories of "past Tumblr" they are most often presented as jokes with little desire to return to that past.

Figure 1. The Tumblr Convention

The popular post in figure 1 demonstrates the "crystalized" self-referential humor noted by participant Andrew. The first user's post in Blue describes the cyclical nature of Tumblr's trajectory, that there was, ten years ago, a sincere belief among some Tumblr users that Tumblr was a "beloved home" unlike anywhere else on the internet. The belief was that this state was something worth protecting from outsiders. Such a sentiment would be typical of Boym's (2001) restorative nostalgia, except that the restorative impulse is immediately undercut twice, first by the user in Blue themselves and then by the user in Pink, who injects "Tumblr history" to a comedic end. Blue notes that the current feeling of Tumblr being a "beautiful hellsite" (Tiidenberg et al., 2021) is both exhausted and ironic. It is not a sincere restorative impulse. Pink then makes reference to 2014's Dashcon (without naming it), a Tumblr fan convention that largely lives in infamy among users as a disaster.

When considering repair, Jackson (2014) advocates for "broken world thinking" (p. 221) in technology research, that "asks what happens when we take erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth and progress, as our starting points" (p. 221). Pink's reblog invoking Dashcon highlights the idea that Tumblr has always been broken, and effectively any meta-fandom assessment of Tumblr's history always begins from a point of having been broken from the start. Understanding the impulse to perform this sort of continual repair performed by Tumblr's meta-fandom refocuses social media research from the new and popular to considering the locations and communities that users refuse to abandon, even if they weren't so great from the start.

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