COVID ONLY ON THURSDAYS: DEALING WITH AN INFODEMIC IN LANGUAGE- AND REGION-BASED ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Frauke Rohden
University of Oslo

Introduction

Even before declaring the global coronavirus outbreak a pandemic in March 2020, the WHO warned in February 2020 that the disease was "accompanied by a massive 'infodemic' - an over-abundance of information" (World Health Organization, 2020). As the pandemic unfolded, social media platforms implemented measures to control information flows. However, alongside platform-wide measures, smaller communities also found themselves grappling with moderation decisions on new types and amounts of content.

To study the reactions of localized online communities facing the 'infodemic', I have examined several language- and region-based online communities on Reddit, exploring how moderation practices and rules were adjusted in existing subreddits in spring 2020.

Background

Platform vernacular (Gibbs et al., 2015) describes the combination of technical affordances and cultural practices that shapes how user interactions differ between large social media platforms. However, within the same platform, many styles of interaction can be observed. For example, Rodgers et al. (2021) highlight the significance of local moderators in geographically based online communities on Facebook. For Reddit, research ranges from pointing out toxic technocultures (Massanari, 2017) to a potential for public engagement with science (Chen et al., 2021). This points to a diversity of subcommunities on the platform, influenced by decentralized moderation practices and unique sets of norms. Fiesler et al. (2018) describe an ecosystem of distinct rules across different subreddits. An analysis of moderation practices on the platform found that a few macro norms hold true across almost all subreddits, while some meso norms only apply to certain groups of subreddits, and a number of micro norms are unique to individual subreddits (Chandrasekharan et al., 2018). A systematic overview of Reddit studies noted that with a majority of the studies being based in computer science and using computational text analysis,

contextualization with qualitative research methods would be important (Proferes et al., 2021).

Methods

Some practical considerations make Reddit an interesting object of research to trace content moderation rules in relation to covid-19: Many subreddit communities actively engage in discussing moderation practices, giving insights into the negotiation of new rules related to the pandemic (accessible and searchable through the pushshift API (Baumgartner et al., 2020)). Furthermore, many subreddits document their rules in a wiki format, allowing to trace changes.

While many subreddits revolve around specific topics (with content moderation focusing on defining what is on-topic or off-topic), region- and language-based subreddits have diverse content that might be grouped into quite different subreddits otherwise. Therefore, moderators in such communities are particularly concerned with organizing and structuring content, in addition to questions of whether a given topic is allowed.

For this study, I examined moderator posts in spring 2020 as well as subreddit rule changes (using the wiki function where available) from 2020 onwards. I have followed three European language-based subreddits throughout the pandemic (r/de, r/sweden, and r/norge) and conducted additional searches for coronavirus-related rule changes in other European subreddit wikis.

Findings and Discussion

Research has examined the diverging user trajectories and controversy around the establishment of r/coronavirus as the official subreddit, compared to alternative subreddits such as r/china_flu (Zhang et al., 2021). Many existing subreddits found themselves forced to relate to the pandemic as well, reflected by meta-discussions about moderation and rules as well as rule changes in these communities that explicitly point to covid-19 related content.

Subreddit moderators used different tools to control pandemic-related content. This includes for example the creation of new geographically-oriented subreddits for covid-19 content, daily or weekly discussion threads, the use of 'flairs' (tags) to indicate the types of content, or schedules to only allow certain topics on certain days. The moderators integrated new rules with existing practices in their subreddits and tended to use strategies they were already employing before the pandemic. In some subreddits, they did so without referencing covid specifically in the moderation rules, relying on the existing rules to be applicable to covid-19 content as well (for example enforced flairs in r/norge, with an additional coronavirus flair). Other subreddits made changes to their rules explicitly addressing covid-19 (for example r/de making extensive changes elaborating on their handling of covid-content, or r/sweden assigning weekdays for covid-discussions and specifying that political and covid-related content would be moderated more strictly).

The wave of information related to the pandemic has led to discussions of moderation practices and rule changes in many communities, making it possible to compare how they react to it. The different strategies make clear that context knowledge is important

for understanding such subcommunities and their differences – for example, whether rules for the content in question have limited it, enforced it to be tagged with distinct flairs, encouraged the use of other subreddits for this topic, or otherwise intervened in what could or could not be posted to the community at a certain time.

Observing this on Reddit is facilitated by the accessibility of post history and the traceability of rules in wikis. Nevertheless, not all parts of the Reddit moderation ecosystem are captured in this way, with for example moderator posts, 'stickied' posts (always displayed on top of the subreddit), rule changes only displayed in the sidebar, or the use of the automoderator tool all intervening in what content can be submitted in a given community. Similar decentralized content moderation practices can be observed on other platforms, for example in Facebook groups, comment sections of YouTube channels or videos, or other online communities, in more or less outspoken forms, making it crucial to understand the context of captured data.

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