



Selected Papers of #AoIR2023:
The 24th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Philadelphia, PA, USA / 18-21 Oct 2023

RESEARCHING UNDER PLATFORMS' GAZE: RETHINKING THE CHALLENGES OF PLATFORM GOVERNANCE RESEARCH

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Introduction

In 2021, Meta, the tech giant and parent company of Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, shut down two New York University researchers' accounts, preventing them from studying political ads and misinformation with the pretence of protecting user privacy (Hatmaker, 2021). Many, however, viewed Meta's move as a way to hinder the researchers' transparency work, and the shut-down raised various concerns about platforms' power over knowledge and their gatekeeping of information (ibid), which affects researchers and users alike.

Towards the 'Revolutions in research methods' theme, this essay addresses the challenges that researching on social media platforms *through* the same platforms poses to researchers, particularly when they are part of and/or observe subcultures and content at the margins, such as nudity and sex work. My goal is to examine how the intersection of platform power, academic precarity and the creator economy affects early-career researchers and academics. At the heart of this are the questions: How can researchers gather data, disseminate results and establish a professional profile under platforms' all-encompassing gaze? What does platform governance - or the regulatory dynamics that determine the freedoms, responsibilities and liabilities of platform companies (Tiideberg, 2021) - and its focus on specific areas of control mean for researching content and users at the margins? What risks do platforms themselves pose to researchers' work? And how does the broader precarity of particularly early-career academic work intersect with the effects of platform power?

These questions are urgent and important, because while platforms can offer extraordinary research opportunities, "their design and day-to-day functioning can impose constraints largely outside the control of researchers" (franzke et al., 2020:12). In short, they are both a site of opportunity (i.e. work) and oppression in the form of

Suggested citation: Are, C. (2023, October). *Researching Under Platforms' Gaze: Rethinking the Challenges of Platform Governance Research*. Paper presented at AoIR 2023: The 24th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Philadelphia, PA, United States: AoIR. Retrieved from: <https://spir.aoir.org/>

abuse and surveillance, for users and researchers alike (Coombes et al., 2022). It is this lack of control, leading to new research challenges and, often, heightened risks, that I wish to address here, reflecting on platforms' influence and chilling effects on research and society within an already opaque social media governance system influenced by systemic offline inequalities (Author & Gerrard, forthcoming).

I am no stranger to platform censorship myself, both in a research and personal capacity: my social media accounts, essential towards my research and, during some stages of my life, towards my income, have been repeatedly censored, affecting my ability to continue my work and to support myself (Author, 2022).

The entities that my research participants have defined as “nameless masters” of platforms (Author, forthcoming) have created plenty a risk and challenge during my own studies on platform governance and its effects on sex working and sex-positive communities. I therefore begin this essay with a personal account of how such censorship has affected my work and research, not to centre my experience, but to highlight how the censorship of specific communities and stigmatised topics does not only affect users' lives and livelihood - it creates a chilling effect on the production of knowledge and research too, making a handful of opaque, mysterious and powerful companies all the more powerful.

Atay (2020) argues that when analysing digital spaces, researchers need fresh new methods. I therefore approach this paper through a digital autoethnography “to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis et al., 2011: 273). Autoethnography is an “interpretation and creation of knowledge rooted in the native context,” using tenets of autobiography and ethnography that, in this case, will be used to describe direct experience of social media moderation's processes (Mitra, 2010: 15). Despite being a creative method, autoethnography still requires researchers “to be clear about their purpose, provide a level of analysis, and attend to the ethical issues that arise in this form of work” (Stahlke Wall, 2016: 5). This paper therefore features considerations on ethics, limitations and my positionality, while presenting “reflexive, critical, creative, evocative, and poetic first-person narratives” to examine “cultural identity presentations and performances in digital spaces” (Atay, 2020: 272). Specifically, this paper takes an approach which regards my social media presence and research experience digital autoethnography, treating both as a narrative, a form of “digital life writing” which, when threaded together, “can tell the theoretically infused stories about the cultures in which we are situated” (ibid: 273)

It is therefore important to state that although I come to the study of social media governance with the significant privilege afforded by being a white, cisgender, university-educated bisexual woman with no lived experiences of sex work, posting sex work adjacent content and researching on the moderation of nudity and sex work has meant facing significant online and offline challenges as a user and as an academic alike. These experiences have shaped me as a researcher and as a person and will therefore shape this paper. Similarly to Coombes et al. (2022), I argue that these instances of censorship both as a creator and a researcher make me an expert of my

own experiences, which are applicable to various user populations and early-career researchers, and therefore worth addressing.

I situate these experiences within broader platform governance literature, conceptualising it as researching under 'platforms' gaze'. Inspired by Massanari (2018), I define 'platforms' gaze' as a gendered, raced, heteronormative and puritan surveillance, constructing a social reality where marginalised individuals and dissent are rendered both hyper-visible and vulnerable to harassment by users and silencing by platforms. Following this definition, I offer thoughts on how platforms' gaze affects researchers gathering data subject to platforms' rules and early-career researchers constructing their personae through digital media. I highlight researcher vulnerability in data collection, results dissemination and persona management, which I problematise in connection with the increasing digital labour required by the 'impact agenda,' or the quest for publications, promotion and visibility within the academy (Jerome, 2020). I conclude with considerations on activist interventions in the platform governance field and with changes in the academy to mitigate researcher precarity.

Despite my privileged position as a researcher, my experiences with platform governance mirrored that of censored users: faced with no transparency from platforms, I found myself reverse-engineering their moderation through stringing together my experiences of censorship to help others in my situation and demand better communication (Author, 2021).

These experiences of precarity in my academic and platform work meant I often chose my research methods not only according to which methodology was more appropriate to my studies, but also according to what was available to me in terms of time and resources, having started to observe platform governance ahead of securing a research post. Platforms were my means of data collection, as they were largely free to use when observing my own experiences. Just like any other user, I had to post about my research by acting within their community guidelines and opaque governance to conduct autoethnographies, ethnographies, qualitative surveys, interviews, content and discourse analyses. My personal experiences as a user therefore blended with my work experiences as a researcher, generating specific risks and challenges borne out of academic and platform work precarity – issues which badly need discussing if we truly aim to revolutionise research methods and practices.

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