CARE, INC.: HOW BIG TECH RESPONDED TO THE END OF ROE

Zelly Martin
University of Texas at Austin

Dominique Montiel Valle
University of Texas at Austin

Samantha Shorey
University of Texas at Austin

Introduction

After the leak of the *Dobbs* decision that ultimately overturned *Roe v. Wade,* technology companies made a series of (officially unrelated, but conspicuously timed) public statements in support of user privacy: Apple released an advertisement showcasing privacy features (O'Flaherty, 2022); Google promised to delete location data of abortion clinic visitors (Grant, 2022); Meta announced testing of default end-to-end-encryption on Messenger and Instagram Direct (Newman, 2022).

On the surface, these declarations cast Big Tech as entities that *take care* to protect their users. Limiting data collection by deleting location history or instituting end-to-end encryption threatens a business-model based on selling user data to advertisers (Zuboff, 2015). Should we understand these decisions as a form of altruistic activism? What might Big Tech have to gain?

We analyze a collection of statements and policy changes by technology companies to understand how corporate decisions are leveraged as a branding strategy and to identify the limits of corporate care. We thus ask: *Can corporations engage in care-ful activism, or are their decisions (as exemplified by their policies and utterances after Dobbs) always-already care-less?*

Platform ideology

In the past, corporations like Meta worked to convince users that their platforms were morally neutral (Deibert, 2020; Gillespie, 2010). Platforms aim to resist legal liability by

claiming they are not arbiters of truth, while maintaining their relevance as public spheres (Gillespie, 2010). Although platforms literally "pick and choose" what content they allow to exist (Gillespie, 2015), they claim to facilitate openness, connection, and accessibility. But by relying on user data for profit (West, 2019; Zuboff, 2015), platforms are inherently capitalist and thus political (Winner, 2017). Further, platforms are inherently closed. Proprietary algorithms mean that users have little insight into their inner workings, which allows platforms to make unilateral decisions "that purport to be in the best interest of their user networks" (Cotter, 2021; Petre et al., 2019, p. 2).

Now, platforms work to appear 'good': they publicly "crack down" on manipulation (Malik, 2022) and speak out for racial justice (Toh, 2020), despite privately subjecting activists to state surveillance (Nurik, 2022). In order to bolster positive public perceptions of their platforms, companies may engage in "commodity activism" or "brand activism" by taking social action or a position on a social issue. Vredenburg et al. (2020) developed a framework for differentiating authentic from inauthentic brand activism by parsing their speech (marketing messaging) from their actions (corporate policies). However, their framework was developed with the aim of guiding brands on how to best perform their activism. It is worth querying whether this is something we should strive for, or if this problematically (re)inscribes corporations as people, thereby perpetuating their moral authority (Petre et al., 2019) over users.

In a forum on popular feminism, Rottenberg observes: "[through neoliberalism] everything is reduced to market metrics, even our political imagination" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 8). This is an integral aspect of commodity activism, as well—ultimately, commodity activism works to enhance capital for corporations rather than enact social change by making "social action …marketable" (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 2). This has bolstered popular feminism (ibid.), which is able to flourish when feminism is popular enough to be a commodity. Engaging in brand activism that supports people who can get pregnant, then, is a cost-benefit analysis: Is it more useful for the corporation to say nothing and avoid angering the opposition, or more marketable for the corporation to come out in defense of reproductive rights?

Politics of care

Platforms hope that we believe they care. They care about connection, they care about transparency, they care about democracy and about privacy. When thinking about platform activism, then, we must engage with "matters of care" (de la Bellacasa, 2011). Caring is historically gendered (Gilligan, 2009) and devalued as antithetical to science in that it is inherently subjective, rather than objective (Code, 2015; Martin et al., 2015). However, Code (2015) argues that to know *is* to care, as questioning how we know what we know requires that we care about how we discovered it. But troubling romanticized notions of care is critical. Paternalistic "care" was and remains a weapon of (post)colonialism and imperialism while sidestepping structural oppression by emphasizing the individual (Murphy, 2015). Care, then, is at once antithetical and aligned with neoliberalism, able to be wielded against and in service of it (Martin et al., 2015; Murphy, 2015).

Data feminism and liberatory pursuits

So does this mean that platforms' social action is always-already capitalist and careless? West (2022) argues that some privacy moves, like instituting end-to-end encryption with an eye toward feminist, Black, queer ideologies rather than cis-hetero white libertarianism, can create communities of care, free from surveillance by corporations and states. Looking beyond social media and search platforms, some science and technology scholars have argued that the instantiation of user agency in self-tracking technologies can be harnessed to resist power structures by (mis)using the technologies to increase user benefit (Fox et al., 2020; Kristensen & Ruckenstein, 2018). Troublingly, though, being a cyborg (Haraway, 1990) is not necessarily a benefit to those seeking reproductive care without *Roe* protections, as digital traces can later implicate abortion-seekers (Singer & Chen, 2022). This calls to mind Lupton's (2013) neoliberal cyborg: a well-behaved, conservative subject seeking wholeness and perfection. Digital technologies create this neoliberal subject, Lupton argues, by encouraging constant self-surveillance and monitoring, and by turning our embodied experience into 'objective' data, i.e., numbers. While subjective knowledge was previously used to determine if an abortion law was broken in pre-Roe America (Holland, 2020), the power of 'objective' data may now be harnessed to criminalize a formerly-pregnant person.

Method

Given the controversy of the *Dobbs* decision, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are very few official statements that address the decision directly (2). We additionally draw upon news articles (76) published from the date of the *Dobbs* leak to the end of the year pulled from Google News results for each platform of interest and "abortion" which pertain to actions (18) taken by platforms. We analyze this compilation of public utterances (96) through critical technocultural discourse analysis (Brock, 2018) to capture the combination of discourse and action in our dataset.

Preliminary Results

Care, in its ideal, is opposed to neoliberalism: resisting individuality in favor of community and refusing to reduce humans to capital (Martin et al., 2015). Yet, there is indeed a "darker side of care" (p. 627). Paternalistic care can be a weapon – used to ensnare and to oppress (Murphy, 2015). We find that platforms redefine care in three main ways: for users, care is neoliberal - platforms provide us with *good* privacy options, for which we are individually responsible. The datafication of our surveillance is reframed as something we can control through making responsible choices. For employees, care is paternalistic (Murphy, 2015; Petre et al., 2019) - employees are offered money for healthcare, at the expense of free expression. Finally, ultimate care is for the platform - that company culture is protected, alliance with the state unthreatened, and above all, profit is promoted. Through the "double vision of care," (Lindén & Lydahl, 2021, p. 8) platform decisions are revealed to extend care in some ways, while also maintaining control over users and their data.

References

Banet-Weiser, S., Gill, R., & Rottenberg, C. (2020). Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation. *Feminist Theory*, *21*(1), 3–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700119842555

Brock, A. (2018). Critical technocultural discourse analysis. *New Media & Society*, *20*(3), 1012–1030. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816677532

Code, L. (2015). Care, concern, and advocacy: Is there a place for epistemic responsibility? *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2015.1.1

Cotter, K. (2021). "Shadowbanning is not a thing": Black box gaslighting and the power to independently know and credibly critique algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society*, *0*(0), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1994624

de la Bellacasa, M. P. (2011). Matters of care in technoscience: Assembling neglected things. *Social Studies of Science*, *41*(1), 85–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312710380301

Deibert, R. J. (2020). *Reset: Reclaiming the Internet for civil society*. House of Anansi.

Fox, S. E., Menking, A., Eschler, J., & Backonja, U. (2020). Multiples over models: Interrogating the past and collectively reimagining the future of menstrual sensemaking. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*, *27*(4), 22:1-22:24. https://doi.org/10.1145/3397178

Gillespie, T. (2010). The politics of 'platforms.' *New Media & Society*, *12*(3), 347–364. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342738

Gillespie, T. (2015). Platforms intervene. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(1), 2056305115580479. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115580479

Gilligan, C. (2009). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Harvard University Press.

Grant, N. (2022, July 1). Google says it will delete location data when users visit abortion clinics. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/01/technology/google-abortion-location-data.html

Haraway, D. (1990). *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203873106

Holland, J. L. (2020). *Tiny you: A Western history of the anti-abortion movement*. Univ of California Press.

Kristensen, D. B., & Ruckenstein, M. (2018). Co-evolving with self-tracking technologies. *New Media & Society*, *20*(10), 3624–3640. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818755650

Lindén, L., & Lydahl, D. (2021). Editorial: Care in STS. *Nordic Journal of Science and Technology Studies*, 3–12. https://doi.org/10.5324/njsts.v9i1.4000

Lupton, D. (2013). *The digital cyborg assemblage: Haraway's cyborg theory and the new digital health technologies* (SSRN Scholarly Paper No. 2272963). https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2272963

Malik, A. (2022, June 21). Meta is cracking down on fake and irrelevant reviews on Facebook. *TechCrunch*. https://techcrunch.com/2022/06/21/meta-cracking-down-fake-irrelevant-reviews-facebook/

Martin, A., Myers, N., & Viseu, A. (2015). The politics of care in technoscience. *Social Studies of Science*, *45*(5), 625–641.

Mukherjee, R., & Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Commodity activism: Cultural resistance in neoliberal times*. NYU Press.

Murphy, M. (2015). Unsettling care: Troubling transnational itineraries of care in feminist health practices. *Social Studies of Science*, *45*(5), 717–737.

Newman, L. H. (2022, August 11). Meta just happens to expand end-to-end encryption. *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/story/meta-messenger-encryption-nebraska-abortion/

Nurik, C. L. (2022). Facebook and the surveillance assemblage: Policing Black Lives Matter activists & suppressing dissent. *Surveillance & Society*, *20*(1), 30–46. https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v20i1.13398

O'Flaherty, K. (2022, May 25). Apple slams Facebook and Google with bold new privacy ad. *Forbes.* https://www.forbes.com/sites/kateoflahertyuk/2022/05/25/apple-slams-facebook-and-google-with-bold-new-privacy-ad/

Petre, C., Duffy, B. E., & Hund, E. (2019). "Gaming the system": Platform paternalism and the politics of algorithmic visibility. *Social Media + Society*, *5*(4), 2056305119879995. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119879995

Singer, N., & Chen, B. X. (2022, July 13). In a post-Roe world, the future of digital privacy looks even grimmer. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/13/technology/personaltech/abortion-privacy-roe-surveillance.html

Toh, M. (2020, June 1). "Black lives matter": Facebook, Netflix, Peloton and other companies take a stand as protests sweep America. *CNN Business.*

https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/01/business/us-protests-companies-respond-intl-hnk/index.html

Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J. A. (2020). Brands taking a stand: Authentic brand activism or woke washing? *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *39*(4), 444–460. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915620947359

West, S. M. (2019). Data capitalism: Redefining the logics of surveillance and privacy. *Business & Society*, *58*(1), 20–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650317718185

West, S. M. (2022). Survival of the cryptic: Tracing technological imaginaries across ideologies, infrastructures, and community practices. *New Media & Society*, *24*(8), 1891–1911. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820983017

Winner, L. (2017). Do artifacts have politics? In *Computer Ethics* (pp. 177–192). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315259697-21

Zuboff, S. (2015). Big other: Surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization. *Journal of Information Technology*, *30*(1), 75–89. https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2015.5