

BEHIND THE SCREEN:  
THE HIDDEN DIGITAL LABOR OF COMMERCIAL CONTENT MODERATION

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## **Abstract**

Commercial content moderation (CCM) is the practice of screening of user-generated content (UGC) posted to Internet sites, social media platforms and other online outlets that encourage and rely upon such material to generate visits to and participation from users. Despite being essential to the media production cycle for these commercial websites and social media platforms as a major source of brand protection, gatekeeping and tastemaking, commercial content moderation is largely unknown outside its own industry and those that rely on it. This research endeavors to unveil the practice of commercial content moderation and to further contextualize it alongside contemporary trends of globalization, outsourcing and other economic and geospatial reconfigurations facilitated by the increasingly networked nature of the world. CCM tasks vacillate from the mind-numbingly repetitive and mundane to exposure to images and material that can be violent, disturbing and, at worst, psychologically damaging, and it requires these tasks of workers that are frequently relatively low-status and low-wage. The workers are typically further isolated because the work they do is in secret, considered an issue of brand protection by their employers. Using analysis of in-depth qualitative interviews with CCM workers in a variety of sectors coupled with techniques of Critical Discourse Analysis of industry-generated materials (e.g., websites; work solicitations), this research connects the practices of CCM to digital media economics, digital media practices and their sociopolitical, economic and ethical implications. It reports on and describes the experiences of content moderators in a number of different contexts and situations. It provides a taxonomy for understanding the worksites and practices of CCM and maps it, on theoretical grounds, to other types of digital and non-digital work, aligning it in the greater context of the ecology of social

media to the end of recognizing, acknowledging and improving the conditions under which the CCM workers labor.

**Keywords**

Commercial content moderation, CCM, content screening, digital labor, user-generated content, UGC, social media, globalization, information flow, information society, immaterial production, knowledge labor.

‘Human-computer interaction’: I mean...what other kind is there?

Christine Pawley, 2009 (personal conversation)

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**--Sarah**

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Summer 2010, Champaign, Illinois

In the hot and muggy central Illinois summer of 2010, iced latte in one hand, I idly clicked my way through the online version of the *New York Times*. It was a welcome, fleeting break from my doctoral studies at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science and a summer reading course on digital media. Usually a daily diversion that lasted no more than a few minutes of my day, this perusal of NYT.com commanded more of my attention than usual. “Concern for Those Who Screen the Web for Barbarity,” the headline proclaimed (Stone 2010). I scanned the story for details.

The reporter set the stage: A call center providing business process outsourcing (BPO) services in rural Iowa called Caleris had branched into a new kind of service. Content screening, or content moderation, was a practice wherein hourly employees at Caleris reviewed uploaded user-generated content (UGC) for major Internet sites and outlets who provide platforms for such user-created material. The *New York Times* piece focused on the fact that workers like those at Caleris and at other BPO content moderation centers were suffering great degrees of work-related burnout and psychological issues based on the content they were seeing and for which they screened. Such content often included scenes of obscenity, hate speech, abuse of children and of animals, and war zone footage. In the same story, the *Times* reported the following on workers at another similar firm:

Workers at Telecommunications On Demand, who make \$8 to \$12 an hour, view photos that have been stripped of information about the users who posted them. Rapidly cycling through pages of 300 images each, they are asked to flag material that is obviously pornographic or violent, illegal in a certain country or deemed inappropriate by a specific Web site. (Stone 2010)

Other similar firms, the *Times* reported, had begun offering psychological counseling to employees who found themselves disturbed and depressed by the material they were viewing as a primary function of their employment. For \$8 per hour, workers sat in cubicles and subjected themselves to content, uploaded by others and intended for social media platforms or websites, that sent them to psychologists. Yet I had never heard of them, or even imagined their existence.

I read the story about the content screeners several times, over and over. I forwarded it to a number of friends, colleagues, and professors, all longtime Internet users, like me, and digital media and Internet scholars themselves. “Have you heard of this job?” I asked. “Do you know anything about this kind of work?” Not one of the people I reached out to had heard of the workers or their work, although a few of them had also seen the *Times* story. Like me, they, too, were transfixed. For a bunch of net nerds and new media geeks, we knew nothing about this practice I dubbed “commercial content moderation,” or CCM — this to differentiate from the kinds of volunteer governance that had gone on in online spaces and communities for years, even for commercial firms (Postigo 2003). And yet, it seemed obvious, once I thought about it, that such a practice must exist. According the most recent figures it publicly released, YouTube alone receives over 100 hours of user-uploaded video content to its website per hour, for dissemination to billions of unique visitors from around the globe, far surpassing the reach of any cable network.<sup>1</sup>

It stood to reason that the YouTubes, Facebooks, Instagrams of the world would not simply let content flow freely and unfettered over its branded properties without some gatekeeping practices in place. But these practices were clearly not part of the public discourse about social media or the Internet, in general, even though it seemed immediately clear that any

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html>; viewed 4/20/2014



decisions made by the people in the cubicles had the potential to greatly impact the user experience of the platforms for which they toiled. Taste-making decisions, content curation decisions, compliance with site or platform guidelines and local laws: all of this was in the hands of people making very little money and even potentially exposed to harm. But the workers existed behind the screen, anonymous and unknown. Who were they? Where did they work and under what conditions? What was their work-life like?

I turned the questions over in my head for days that turned into weeks. I talked about the issue with my friends and mentors. I began to think about the CCM workers in the context of my own life online — at the time, almost 20 years – and asked myself, “Who is behind the screen?” But before I could properly attempt to formulate a means to respond to the questions that dogged me about the CCM workers, I first had to get real about my own relationship to the Internet, two decades, and many transformations, in the making.

### **Summer, 1994, Madison, Wisconsin**

In the summer of 1994, I was an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, pursuing a double-major in French and Spanish language and literature. Despite the proclivity for the humanities that I displayed in my choice of academic pursuits, a longtime fascination with computers, coupled with my newfound interest in Bulletin Board Systems (BBSes), or text-based Internet online communities (accessed from my dorm room over a 14.4 modem and tying up the phone line constantly, much to my roommate’s chagrin), meant that I possessed just enough computer skills to have retired from the business of dishwashing in my dorm’s basement cafeteria, and move into the relatively cushy job of computer lab specialist in the Memorial InfoLab, the campus’s largest and busiest computer lab at the time. In an era that predated affordable or portable laptops or the ubiquity of wireless networking, the lab, housed on the

ground floor of the university's graduate research library, was an impossibly heavily-trafficked place. I recognized many of the university's 40,000 undergrads when I came across them on campus because they had likely, at some point, camped out in front of a workstation in our lab.

One day, I reported in to work and caught up with my colleague, Roger, as we strolled the floor of the lab. We stopped for a moment and stood, contemplating a row of Macintosh Quadras (they of the famous "pizza box" form factor), as they churned and labored, mostly unsuccessfully, to load something on their screens. It was an interface consisting of a greyish background and some kind of icon in the upper corner that seemed to indicate loading was in progress, but nothing came up (NB: this was more likely due to a lack of content or a choked network, given the time, than anything else inherent to Mosaic). After a few moments of watching this computational act of futility, I turned to Roger, a Comp Sci major, and asked, "What is that?"

"That," he replied, while gesturing at the grey screens, "is NCSA Mosaic. It's a World Wide Web browser."

My blank look urged him to carry on, impatiently, with his explanation. "It's the graphical Internet!"

My response was as instantaneous as a reflex as I stuttered out a disdainful reply. "Well," I pronounced, "that'll never take off. Everyone knows the Internet is a purely text-based medium."



**Figure 1.1:** On April 23, 2013, the IEEE Computer Society celebrated the 20th anniversary of NCSA Mosaic. This web browser, developed at the University of Illinois' National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA) was distributed free of charge and its GUI interface was largely credited with sparking widespread interest in and adoption of the World Wide Web. Photo credit: STR, July 2012

And with that, I sealed my fate as perhaps being the person more wrong about the future of the Internet than anyone had ever before been. Because the graphical Internet, and the Web, as it came to be known, did take off — to say the very least. And in so doing, the experience and culture of personal computing were changed irrevocably; the Internet went from a niche experience cloistered in universities and research-and-development facilities around the world, its denizens made up of computer and tech geeks, to a medium of commerce, communication, financial transactions, employment and entertainment. While the Internet-fueled tech sector rode up and down over several booms and busts during the next two decades, the Internet, in its many guises, and the platforms that existed upon it, entered into the everyday lives of everyday people. Access to it expanded, went mobile, went wireless. Fortunes were made, and lost, and the American economy became tied to its successes, its excesses and its crashes. Meanwhile, my own experience of online life transformed from something I was loath to talk about in mixed

company, due to the numerous explanations and excuses I had to make to explain my time spent logged in, to something commonplace and mundane. Over time, Amazon, Friendster, MySpace, Facebook and Google brought the Internet out of the province of the nerd élite, and into part of everyday life.



**Figure 1.2:** On July 25, 1994, Time Magazine put “the strange new world of the Internet ” on its weekly national newsmagazine’s cover. A family member responded by asking me, “Aren’t you on that?” Image credit: <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19940725,00.html>. Retrieved March 4, 2014.

I have told the story of my epic prognostication failure numerous times over the years, to colleagues and students alike, using it as a pointed illustration of the dangers of becoming so embedded in one’s particular experience of a technology that imagining other iterations and permutations of it become out of reach. Such a lack of perspective becomes a dangerous myopia for a technologist, or a student, or scholar engaged in the study of digital technologies, all identities I have inhabited in the subsequent 20 years following my pronouncement.

And so, over the years, I have been loath to stake great claims on technology futures or

make predictions for the ways in which technological developments might or might not transpire or take hold. Yet I return to this story now with a new perspective — one that is, in fairness to the truth, somewhat more gracious to the shortcomings of my observations 20 years ago. Perhaps what I sensed that summer day in the computer lab was a certain sense of discomfort brought about by a concern for what I felt represented a coming sea change and paradigm shift in the way in which the Internet was used and culturally understood. In 1994, the Internet still held, for me, at least, the great promise and potential of a nascent communication form and information-sharing platform. I found solace in the disembodied nature of it, where one could try on different identities, points of view, political stances. In the social spaces I inhabited online at the time, participants were judged not on how they looked or by their access to material resources, but by how well they constructed their arguments or how persuasively they made a case for the position they advocated. In my case, for example, it allowed me to experiment with identifying as gay well before I was able to do so “IRL” (in real life); having had the opportunity to textually embody the identity made the real-world embodiment a much easier process than it might have been. What might, therefore, be lost, in an Internet that was no longer characterized by text, but by image? Even early on, I feared that the change would likely lead to commercialization, and with it, digital enclosure and spaces of control. Indeed, unlike my first and earlier prediction, that one, I argue, has largely come true (as I discuss at length in Chapter 4).

Even in spite of my own early privileged and mostly positive engagements online, and what I and others viewed as its potential as a space for new ways of thinking and doing,<sup>2</sup> all was

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<sup>2</sup> Northwestern professor Jennifer S. Light, for example, saw new opportunity for feminist thought and spaces online when she authored an essay on the topic as a graduate student in 1995, “The Digital Landscape: New Space for Women?” *Gender, Place & Culture* 2, no. 2; further, the 1996 anthology *Wired Women*, edited by Lynn Cherny and Elizabeth Reba Weise, also held out such hope.

not a panacea in online life even in the pre-Web, pre-commercialization explosion. Although early champions of “cyberspace” (as we often poetically referred to it at the time) often suggested limitless possibilities for early Internet social and community spaces, their rhetoric frequently suffered from the jingoism of a sort of new techno-tribalism, invoking a set of problematic and uncomfortable metaphors of techno-Manifest Destiny: pioneering, homesteading and the electronic frontier (Turner 2005).

Other scholars, too, identified a whole host of well-worn real-world “-isms” that appeared in the cyberworld, just as endemic to those spaces, it would seem, as they were in physical space. Lisa Nakamura identified the “hostile performance[s]” of race and gender passing in online textual spaces in her early article, “Race In/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet ” (1995). Julian Dibbell recounted the bizarre and disturbing tale of anonymity-enabled sexual harassment on LambdaMOO in “A Rape in Cyberspace,” the first chapter of his *My Tiny Life* (Dibbell 1998), and USENET newsgroups could be characterized by arcane and extensive rules for civil participation and self-governance, or the very opposite, where flames and disturbing content served as the very *raison d’être* of a group’s existence (Pfaffenberger 1996).

Suffice it to say, the Internet was not without its problems. Not least was the fact that it was a rarified and privileged space; one had to have some sort of university-based access, for example, in these early days, to participate in many of the online spaces I came to know, and that, too, was predicated on the further privilege of access to a computer and a network connection. Many people went unrepresented online at that time quite simply because many people were not online in the first place.

Nevertheless, these early online experiences helped me to form my own relationship to

the Internet and led me on the path to where I am today. My experience with early online community — characterized by its tedious and often contentious self-governance, voluntary participation and veneration of status-holding and power-wielding community leaders, predisposition to the primacy of computer geek culture, and DIY sensibilities (it was not uncommon for a system to be hosted, for example, on a cast-off mainframe system in someone's closet) — has contextualized and framed my approach to my own Internet studies. My own experiences were put in sharp relief as I read, for the first time, about the Iowa-based content screeners, just one state over — people who probably, in fact, looked very much like me. In order to understand their story of work and life online, I realized that I had to understand my own, as well.

#### **2014, Behind the Screen: The Hidden Digital Labor of Commercial Content Moderation**

I have subsequently told friends and students alike that this is how you know you have found a research subject that will drive and sustain you: it is the one that keeps you up at night. The practice of commercial content moderation, and the unknown people who did it for a living, kept me up at night. This study therefore represents the germination of ideas formulated during those sleepless nights, and many days and nights since. In it I endeavor to trace and contextualize CCM through several lenses. This study:

- Offers a theoretical mapping of the terrain and practice of online content moderation of user-generated content, which, I argue, is an often purposefully obfuscated process, and the work itself a type of immaterial “knowledge labor;” this theoretical mapping thus provides language to classify and understand the work and its worksites using a taxonomy approach, and relating to other forms of knowledge labor in the digital age.

The major findings of this portion of the study are collected in Chapter 2, which provides

details about the CCM terrain in the context of other labor practices, and as they relate to earlier theories about what the prospect of knowledge labor offered, vis-à-vis its frequently decidedly less glamorous realities.

- Provides empirical data gathered from CCM workers in a number of different contexts, about their perceptions of the work they do, and the quality and nature of their work lives. I conducted lengthy, in-depth, qualitative interviews with CCM workers, and subsequently analyzed the results, highlighting the workers' own self-reported feelings about the job they do, the mechanisms by which they do it (i.e., the actual mechanics of the CCM practice), and the impact of the work they perform on their work and non-work lives. This work represents the first empirical evidence collected in any academic study, qualitative or quantitative, of CCM screeners, to my knowledge. This gap exists for two reasons: first, because this practice at a commercial and organized level, is relatively new and second, because the workers are extremely difficult to locate and enroll in a study (both of these topics are discussed at length within Chapters 2, 3, 5 and 6). Studies of similar low-wage, low-status fields (e.g., call center work) or of work involving screening tasks do exist and have proven instructive in helping to theorize this study. For example, Parks notes, in her study of airport security screeners, that work involving relentless searching and screening via video is a “repetitive, monotonous and stressful task that requires constant vigilance” (Parks 2007, 187). In the case of CCMers, not only is their work likely to be monotonous, but it also frequently exposes them to disturbing images whose hazards go unseen because they are not necessarily physically apparent, immediate or understood.
- Contextualizes CCM work and workers against a backdrop of a commercialized Internet and



social media space, and understands it as one means of gatekeeping and control mechanism among many protocols of surveillance, control and digital enclosure that characterizes the contemporary Internet. This discussion is tackled at length in Chapter 4.

- Humanizes the CCM workers and brings to light their contributions, their sophisticated views and knowledge of the state of the Internet and of digital culture, and articulates the conditions under which they labor — all previously unknown, due to the dual pressures of secrecy as terms of their employment and the powerful mythology of Internet interaction that denies the necessity of their role. The fruits of my discussions with them, and subsequent analysis, make up Chapters 5 and 6.

Aad Blok, in his introduction to the volume, *Uncovering Labour in Information Revolutions, 1750-2000*, notes that scholarly discussions of the evolutions and revolutions in information and communication technology (ICT) development have tended to ignore the concomitant developments in labor practices. He further notes that if, “in this respect, any attention is given to labour, it is focused mainly on the highly skilled ‘knowledge work’ of inventors, innovators, and system-builders . . . ” (Blok 2003, 5). This study, therefore, aims to avoid such an oversight in the case of CCM workers and to, instead, foreground their contributions alongside other knowledge work that is typically better known and accorded higher status, as well as voluntary human (“user”) contributions to the Internet.

## **Chapter 2: Understanding Commercial Content Moderation**

Internet sites, social media, and other online outlets encourage and rely on material posted by human beings (“users”) to generate visits to and participation in their platforms; they rely equally on human beings (“moderators” or “content screeners”) to vet that material. Commercial content moderation (CCM) is the organized practice of screening user-generated content (UGC) posted to Internet sites, social media and other online outlets. A practice little known outside the industries who offer or rely upon it, and frequently unnoticed or unseen by end users, commercial content moderation is performed by workers who review uploaded UGC and make decisions about its appropriateness for inclusion, exclusion or removal from the site for which it was initially destined. This process may take place prior to material being submitted for inclusion or distribution on a site, or it may take place after material has already been uploaded. In particular, content screening may be triggered as the result of complaints about material from site moderators or other site administrators, from external parties (e.g., companies alleging misappropriation of material they own), or from other users themselves who are disturbed or concerned by what they have seen and then trigger mechanisms on a site, such as the ‘flagging’ of content, to prompt a review by moderators.

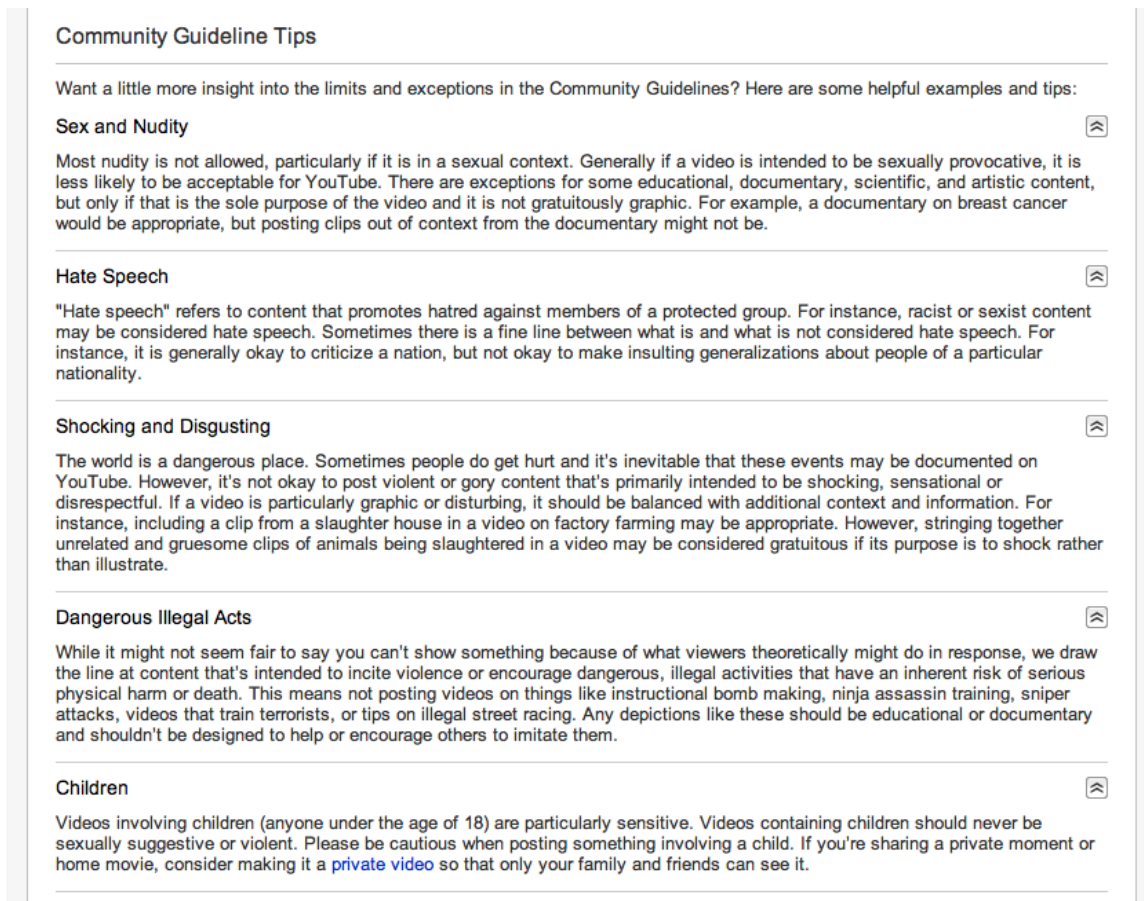
CCM is an essential practice in the media production cycle for commercial websites, social media platforms, and media properties that solicit UGC as a part of their online presence. For those who employ this practice, CCM and screening is a crucial step that protects their corporate or platform brand (typically via user adherence to site guidelines or rules), ensures compliance with relevant laws and statutes governing their operations, and maintains an audience of users willing to visit, upload and view content on their sites. Yet contending with this content is often a game of catch-as-catch-can. On many highly trafficked sites, the amount of

UGC submitted for distribution is staggering: YouTube reports that 100 hours of video are uploaded to its servers every minute and Facebook receives over 200 million photo uploads per day, according to an engineer for Facebook Photos.<sup>3</sup> How the moderation occurs, however, varies by platform, company, the kind of UGC solicited by the platform/site, and the level of tolerance for risk that a company or site is willing to take. A number of configurations and options are therefore available such that companies are able to tailor a CCM solution to meet their particular needs. This chapter will develop a framework for understanding these nuances, and the sites and configurations of CCM labor as they exist today.

Making decisions about what UGC is acceptable and what is not is a complex process, beyond the capabilities of software or algorithms alone. While some content lends itself to partial batch processing or other types of machine-automation, the vast majority of it requires human intervention — particularly when it involves video content or images. When UGC is screened, either before or after it has been posted, human screeners are called upon to employ an array of high-level cognitive functions and cultural competencies to make decisions about its appropriateness for a site or platform. They must be experts in matters of taste of the site's presumed audience, have cultural knowledge about location of origin of the platform and of the audience (both of which may be very far removed, geographically and culturally, from where the screening is taking place), have linguistic competency in the language of the UGC (that may be a learned or second language for the screener), be steeped in the relevant laws governing the site's location of origin and be experts in the user guidelines and other platform-level specifics concerning what is and is not allowed.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.htm>.



**Figure 2.1:** Screenshot of a portion of a YouTube page destined for its users that describes material prohibited for upload, giving ample insight into the kinds of video that CCM employees must screen out. “YouTube - Broadcast Yourself: Community Guideline Tips,” October 3, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/t/community\\_guidelines#tips..](http://www.youtube.com/t/community_guidelines#tips..)

Some UGC is very obviously inappropriate vis-à-vis site guidelines or relevant laws, and moderators can make quick and easy decisions about it. They may also cull their queues of user-generated material by engaging computational tools such as text searches for banned words (in the case of text-based comment moderation), ‘skin filters’ that can determine if a large portion of image or video content contains bare flesh (suggesting pornography), or tools designed to match, flag or remove copyrighted material.<sup>4</sup> Despite these mechanisms that can speed or even automate some aspects of the moderation process, the majority of uploaded UGC still requires human

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret M. Fleck and David A. Forsyth. “Finding Naked People.” <http://www.cs.hmc.edu/~fleck/naked.html> Accessed December 22, 2012.

review.

In the case of images and video, machine-automated detection remains an incredibly complex computational problem. Known as “computer vision,” computer recognition of images and objects is an ongoing area of research that presents numerous technological problems and is both computationally and financially infeasible for implementation in high-production UGC-review environments (Forsyth and Ponce 2011; McHenry 2012). The tasks therefore fall to humans to work through queues of digital material, employ a decision-making process and, if necessary, intervene.

Yet commercial content moderation of UGC remains a relatively unknown and frequently not-fully-disclosed aspect of participation in social media and UGC-reliant websites and services. Many online social media and other UGC-sharing platforms consider the particulars of their moderation practices and the specifics of their policies to be proprietary information. In their view, full disclosure of the exact nature of their policies could lead to unscrupulous users attempting to game the rules, or potentially give business competitors an edge by revealing practices or processes considered secret; indeed, content moderators are frequently required to sign non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) about the nature of their work in which they pledge to not reveal the particulars of their employment or job duties, with these reasons cited.

There is, however, be another factor that compels UGC-reliant companies to keep their content moderation needs unknown: content moderation is an unpleasant necessity that reveals the underside of UGC-reliant sites as mechanisms of distribution for those users wishing to circulate unpleasant, distasteful and disturbing material. By the same token, CCM requires work tasks that vacillate from the mind-numbingly repetitive and mundane to exposure to images and

material that can be violent, disturbing and, at worst, psychologically damaging. Further, it requires these tasks of workers who are frequently relatively low-status and low-wage.

It is an image of online participation that few social media companies or other platforms and sites featuring UGC would care to cultivate or openly discuss; in one recent NPR story on the topic, Microsoft and Google both declined to make access to CCM workers available to Rebecca Hersher of NPR's *All Things Considered* for her “Laboring in the Shadows to Keep the Web Free of Child Porn.”<sup>5</sup> In the same news story, a spokesperson for Microsoft further described the CCM work as “. . . a yucky job.” Fortunately for them, the characteristics of the arrangements under which content moderation workers labor lend themselves to a workforce whose work goes unseen and unknown by the vast majority of Internet users.

Yet even if generally unknown, and kept away from the public view by Internet sites and media corporations, clearly CCM is an integral part of their activities and a necessary mediation in Internet content creation. Research does provide enough information for us to outline the various sites, conditions, and participants of CCM.

### **A Taxonomy of Commercial Content Moderation**

To understand the practice of CCM, it is necessary to gain a picture of how, where, and by whom the work of moderation takes place. Content screening of social media is part of a production cycle that “. . . creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response” (Hardt and Negri 2001, 108). This social media production is, in turn, facilitated by digital networks in a globally connected environment, arrangements that Michelle Rodino-Colocino describes as “technomadic” (Rodino-

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<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Hersher, “Laboring In The Shadows To Keep The Web Free Of Child Porn.” *All Things Considered*. NPR, November 17, 2013 <http://www.npr.org/2013/11/17/245829002/laboring-in-the-shadows-to-keep-the-web-free-of-child-porn>

Colocino 2008, 105). Content screeners labor under a number of different regimes, employment statuses and workplace conditions around the world; frequently, they are deployed at significant geographical distance from the sites of production of the UGC they moderate, as well as from the hosting sites of the platforms for which the UGC is destined. It is therefore useful to employ a taxonomy of online content moderation work (see Table 2.1) to understand these different sites and conditions in which screening takes place.

Type	Worksite Location	Employment Characteristics	Employment Status
<b>In-House</b>	On-site or in-house at company requiring UGC screening and moderation.	Workers are specialized and focus on content screening for a particular site, brand or platform. Typically offers best wages of all the arrangements for moderation workers, yet frequently at less than full-time, permanent full-status work.	Variable; runs gamut from full-time full employee to limited-term or part-time employment via a third-party company. Workers may be salaried or hourly.
<b>Boutique</b>	Variable; can be local to the boutique firm, or done via globally dispersed contractors hired on for the screening tasks.	Firms specialize in online brand management or on content moderation, specifically, for other firms. Specialists in managing and staying abreast of many areas of a company's online presence; typically engaged by companies that are not digital media companies, themselves	Variable, from full-time permanent employment by the boutique firm to per-job contract work basis.
<b>Call Center</b>	Large-scale operations centers with technological infrastructure to handle multiple international clients or contracts and to provide numerous services, often on a 24/7 business cycle.	Third-party companies offering a suite of services (BPO, or business process outsourcing), among which UGC moderation is but one of many call center and other customer-support operations. Located throughout the world, with the Philippines currently the global leader in call centers.	Workers are typically employed by the call center for which they work, which, in turn, secures contracts or sub-contracts from major firms. Working conditions and rates of pay vary throughout the globe. In the United States, call center work is typically relatively low-paying work paid by the hour.
<b>Microlabor Website</b>	Worldwide; online.	Geographically dispersed; workers are disconnected and disjointed from other workers and those soliciting the moderation. Can be done at any time of the day and anywhere a worker can access the microlabor website.	Workers' relationship to employers is on a per-task basis; moderation tasks are broken out to their smallest component parts — typically payment per item viewed or screened in a process that can be described as 'digital piecework.' Compensation is often on the order of pennies per task completed.

**Table 2.1:** Taxonomy of online content moderation labor arrangements

**In-House:** ‘In-house’ is a complex concept in the context of online-content screening, in which ‘in-house’ can denote a range of different employment statuses and relationships to the company and media property or site for which the moderation is being performed, from full-time employment with the company/site to other, less permanent arrangements. Some example arrangements might include workers performing their moderation labor at the company’s physical site (e.g., a headquarters or company-owned property) alongside other workers, but possessing a status other than full-time employee of that company. The employment status may, instead, take forms like ‘temporary’ or ‘contract,’ in which case the workers are hired by the company soliciting the moderation, but only for a finite time and with no guaranteed future employment within the company as soon as the contract for moderation has been fulfilled. Another arrangement might have workers working on-site at the company soliciting moderation work, but actually being hired, managed and paid for by a third-party contracting company or companies. This arrangement is fairly common within information technology (IT) for low- or entry-level positions, and/or for fixed-term positions (Bidwell and Briscoe 2009; Hyde 2002; Kalleberg 2000; Smith 2002), which is how many content moderation jobs are often classified. The primary characteristic that is shared among the ‘in-house’ moderators is that they are physically located at the platform or company for which the screened content is ultimately destined, although very little can be surmised about their employment status with that company based on their physical presence on-site alone.

**Boutiques:** A ‘boutique’ arrangement refers to specialized firms that offer social media brand management, generally, or content moderation specifically, for other firms. These businesses are specialists in managing and staying abreast of many areas of a company’s online presence, and are typically engaged by companies that are not digital media companies

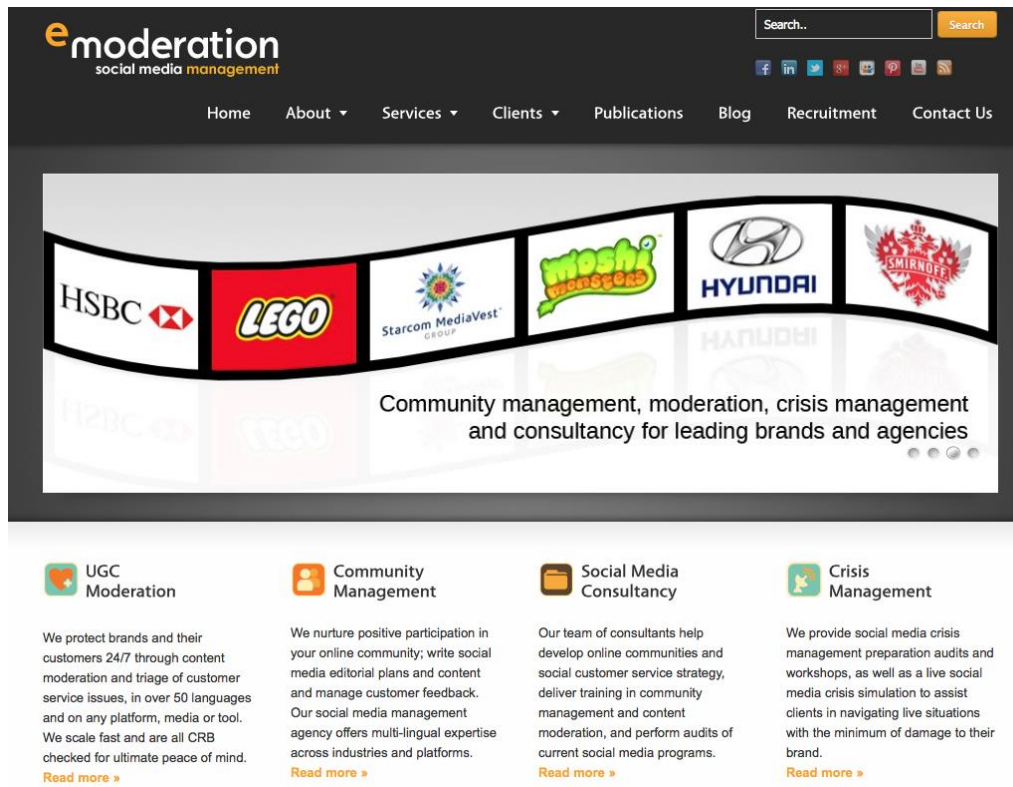


themselves. eModeration Social Media Management, a U.K.-based firm, is one such boutique specializing in this way, providing moderation of user comments and other UGC for clients as diverse as MTV, LEGO, Hyundai and HSBC bank.<sup>6</sup> While these clients do not themselves specialize in social media and are not primarily engaged in encouraging UGC creation or distribution as a fundamental facet of their business or operations, they employ features (e.g., comments sections; user picture uploads) that solicit UGC to encourage customer or citizen engagement and loyalty. As such, the content requires monitoring, screening and moderation. Companies like eModeration, or Israel-based Moderation.Pro provide these services, and may manage brand identity across numerous online platforms and sites, including the company's own web presence, Twitter accounts, Facebook pages, and so on.<sup>7</sup> In many cases, not only do they moderate and curate UGC engagement on behalf of other companies, but they may even engage in "community management" practices: seeding content by posting comments, tweeting, or otherwise attempting to engage consumers in positive conversations or interactions regarding brands or products of the companies for which they work.

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<sup>6</sup> See eModeration, <https://www.emoderation.com>. Accessed 4/23/2014.

<sup>7</sup> "Moderation.Pro: Content Moderation for User Generated Content," accessed January 5, 2013, [http://www.moderation.pro/moderation\\_services.html](http://www.moderation.pro/moderation_services.html)



**Figure 2.2:** eModeration, a U.K.-based boutique CCM firm, has clients across numerous industries and parts of the world.

**Call Centers:** The ‘call center’ environment refers to third-party companies offering a suite of services (frequently referred to as Business Process Outsourcing, or BPO), among which UGC moderation is but one service, and is often secondary to call center and other customer-support operations. These companies have the benefit of already being highly technologically enhanced, a necessary feature in order to handle globalized high-volume phone call traffic; the addition of content moderation work can therefore be passed along to them with ease and efficiency. These centers are globally dispersed, with the most call centers in the world now being found in the Philippines (Bajaj 2011), but are also well known as being located in India, Bangladesh and in other parts of the world (e.g. within the US and in European sites such as Ireland and Italy). These centers rely upon a multilingual and multiculturally competent workforce that works on-site at the call center to respond to the labor needs of a global

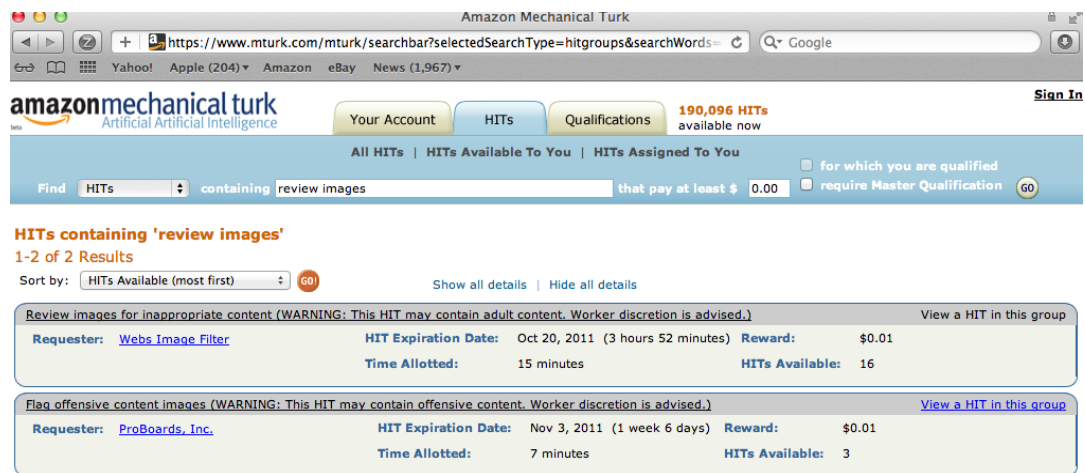
marketplace, often on a 24/7 cycle. In call center environments that cater to Western business needs but are, themselves, located outside of the West, issues of cultural and linguistic authenticity can serve as mechanisms for firms to differentiate themselves, and to suggest a higher level of service. This results in workers in these environments being asked to perform linguistic and cultural norms to match the clientele, but which are often at odds with their own local cultural and linguistic self-expression. This disconnect can result in the translation of a job well done into measures of how good an employee may be at cultural and linguistic passing (Mirchandani 2012, 37-53).

**Microlabor Websites:** Content moderation is an ideal labor form for the web-based globally networked microlabor websites. These digital labor marketplaces connect those seeking task completion and those seeking employment on a per-task or per-job basis. Sites such as oDesk.com (Caraway 2010) and Amazon Mechanical Turk allow workers to bid on knowledge work that can be performed as long as the worker has access to a computer and connection to the Internet in order to bid on the job and then perform it. In the case of Amazon Mechanical Turk, owned and operated by Amazon.com, the site focuses on job units (HITs, or ‘human intelligence tasks,’ in the site’s parlance) that are computationally difficult to achieve, such as content screening and moderation. It describes its philosophy thusly on its website for prospective workers:

Amazon Mechanical Turk is based on the idea that there are still many things that human beings can do much more effectively than computers, such as identifying objects in a photo or video, performing data de-duplication, transcribing audio recordings, or researching data details. Traditionally, tasks like this have been accomplished by hiring a large temporary workforce (which is time consuming, expensive, and difficult to scale) or have gone

undone.<sup>8</sup>

Microlabor sites represent the most disconnected and disjointed of all the arrangements under which content moderators labor. Additionally, accountability to the worker — for the job tasks, work environment, rate of pay, and so on — is the lowest of all the forms described here. Under the microlabor arrangement, workers can be the most globally dispersed and isolated of all content moderation workers. They are also likely to be performing the smallest configuration of work. Tasks are broken out to their smallest component parts, such that one view of one image constitutes one job, with payment being as low as US \$.01 for applying a CCM decision to that image (“Amazon Mechanical Turk,” October 20, 2011). Workers have no official status with any company, receive no salary or hourly remuneration for their work and no benefits, and are incentivized to do as many tasks as possible to accumulate payment. It is, in effect, digital piecework (Aytes 2012; Ipeiritis 2010; Irani and Silberman 2013; Ross et al. 2010).



**Figure 2.3:** Content screening opportunities are available on Mechanical Turk, where workers can elect to view and make decisions about potentially offensive material for a “reward,” or payment, of one cent per task. “Worker discretion is advised” Amazon Mechanical Turk, Screenshot, October 20, 2011.

Companies requiring content moderation services may develop a hybrid strategy that

<sup>8</sup> Amazon Mechanical Turk. “FAQ > Overview.” Copyright 2005-2014. Accessed December 21, 2012.

https://www.mturk.com/mturk/help?helpPage=overview#what\_is\_hit.

involves engaging workers at multiple levels of the above taxonomy and across multiple labor sites worldwide. For example, they may maintain a suite of in-house contract workers who labor at the company headquarters but are retained and paid by an outsourcing firm. The in-house team may, in turn, collaborate with teams working at call centers elsewhere in the world, such as Manila or Gurgaon, who respond to a portion of cases needing review. A company may hire a boutique firm to manage all aspects of its social media brand identity including UGC review, or it may turn, instead, to microlabor sites such as oDesk or Amazon Mechanical Turk to deal with the overwhelming inflow of UGC they receive, on a piece-by-piece basis.

Whatever the arrangements and strategies implemented to get the work of content moderation done, there tend to be shared characteristics at all levels of UGC moderation and screening: it is often performed by contract, semi-permanent or temporary workers in low-wage, low-status environments. It is a global industry and practice. Work is often performed well removed from the site — and often the country — for which the content under review was initially destined. Finally, content moderation of UGC fits precisely into new forms of technology-dependent knowledge labor envisioned, initially and optimistically, as having the potential for providing a better quality of work and life, a higher standard of living and more leisure time to those engaged in it. In contrast to how it was envisioned, however, it is work that necessitates large labor forces doing monotonous, unpleasant work. In its global search for workers willing to perform digital piecework for micro-payments, online content moderation and screening may, instead, represent a technologically-enhanced race to the bottom. As Ross et al. note, Turker population has shifted to be mostly from India, and many “Turk” as a part- or full-time job for \$2.00 per hour or less (2010, 2868).

## **Framing the Historical Labor Context: the “Post-Industrial Society”**

In 1973, against the backdrop of the Cold War, the Vietnam era and the advances in science and technology that fueled and were fueled by both, sociologist Daniel Bell published his seminal book-length work, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. In it, Bell put forth his vision of a socio-economic paradigm shift so profound as to represent a “. . . change in the social framework of Western society” (Bell 1973, 9), and specifically in economic structure, technological capability and occupational systems (Bell 1973, 13). Characteristics of these shifts, according to Bell, included a movement from a commodity, or goods-oriented, economy to one focused on the service sector; the rise of the technical class, who engage in specialized, scientific or other technical work (e.g., data analysis; engineering); and the increased importance and predominance of technological innovation. These shifts, in concert, would result in a service-based, technologically-driven economy whose stock-in-trade would be production and analysis of new knowledge — the desired output under Post-Industrial society and another key component of the new socioeconomic arrangement.

These shifts, already underway at the time of Bell’s writing and with more “forecasted” (his preferred term), represented an evolutionary leap from the status quo of the structures in place since the nineteenth century’s great industrialization and which had endured throughout most of the twentieth. That era’s sites of production were typically factories producing tangible goods en masse. Organizationally, the sites were arranged in a vertical hierarchy of management and workers, all of whom were long-term employees, frequently working on a manufacturing production line. This type of organization and production is frequently described as “Fordist,” due to the debt owed to the automobile manufacturer’s innovations in assembly line production and other efficiencies in production and labor practice. Accordingly, Bell’s description of and

prediction for the Post-Industrial era concluded that the industrial-era commitment to innovation in routinization, mechanization and other efficiencies of scientific management practices would be carried forward and enhanced by the socioeconomic shifts he had predicted.

The end result of these shifts would lead workers out of the factories and into offices, working more efficiently but ostensibly for fewer hours, enhancing the quality of work life, increasing time for leisure and pushing American society to the fore in industries of the future that would be based not on tangible goods manufacturing but rather on scientific and technological innovation. As knowledge production would increasingly become the most important output of workers, the movement from an Industrial society, based on mass-production of tangible goods, to a Post-Industrial society, based on the production, and, thereby, the commodification, of information, would increase. Indeed, throughout the 1970s to the mid- to late-1980s, many (but not all) of Bell's predictions had come true: mass-production of goods had declined in the U.S., while new sectors of innovation in science and technology experienced periods of unprecedented growth. Silicon Valley, for example, experienced its first great period of prominence during this time. By 1976, Marc Porat began his influential dissertation by asserting “. . . we are now an information economy. Over half our wages and nearly half of our GNP originate with the production, processing and distribution of goods and services,” and by as early as 1967, “over half of all labor income [was] earned by workers whose tasks [were] predominantly informational” (Porat 1976, 1-2).

Meanwhile, other scholars began to deepen critical analyses of contemporary socioeconomic organization and ICT development, many critiquing Bell's largely optimistic view (Mosco 1989; H. Schiller 1981). Sociologist Manuel Castells began to develop his theory of a “network society,” an information-driven economy characterized by the compression of time

and space into a “space of flows” and organization and labor practices reconstituted into flexible, reconfigurable and dynamic structures that more closely resembled interconnected nodes than they did the top-down hierarchies of the factories and plants of the Industrial Era (Castells 2000). Such organization, enhanced by digitalized, data-driven computational power of global digital connectivity, transcended geospatial boundaries into global networking arrangements and was no longer limited to a traditional workday. Instead, it could function across time zones and around the clock.

Yet this new network configuration of the Post-Industrial society did not benefit all; on the contrary, the very characteristics that made it so appealing to some served to only reinforce many social inequities experienced by many, and create new ones, too, particularly in arrangements that seemed to benefit the private sector at the expense of the public sphere. Castells, for example, critiqued the Post-Industrial Network Society on this basis, cautioning against the new inequities that arose from the geospatial reconfigurations produced by compressed time and space. He described this as a “Fourth World,” a new space of interconnected locales around the world whose commonality and connection was predicated not on geographic proximity or an historic trajectory of underdevelopment (due to colonization, for example, as was the case for so many so-called “third world” countries), but due to their shared exclusion from the Network Society (Castells 2004, 143). Concern for this exclusion of people from the globally-networked world culminated in the identification of the “Digital Divide” phenomenon, within the United States, with an influential 1995 study by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) (NTIA 1995). Research regarding the nature and character of these informational divides continued throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, with measures taken in Europe and between and among many economically diverse



areas of the world (Dutton 2004; Hargittai 1999; J. Van Dijk and Hacker 2003), and included scholars, such as Herbert Schiller and Dan Schiller, who proposed that the digital divide was simply the expression of capitalism's schisms as perpetuated by the intertwined lack of access to ICT and a stranglehold by a relative few large corporations over their control (H. Schiller 1995; D. Schiller 1999).

Indeed, the characteristics of the world economy, too, had begun to significantly shift at the same time as the changes described by Bell, Castells and others took hold. Markets moved across traditional state and geographic borders in a great global expansion. Because financial information and transactions could more swiftly traverse the globe, respond to changes in markets on a worldwide scale, and be analyzed and reconfigured in increasingly complex, machine-aided ways, governments in major Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom increasingly relied upon erstwhile fringe economic policies of supply-side economics to advocate and gain a reduction in regulatory and other barriers to market entry and expansion, and the data and information-driven financial service sector experienced large-scale growth in such areas as investment banking, debt servicing and lending, and speculation (Harvey 2005). These sectors made great gains throughout the last thirty or so years, and were heavily reliant on the features of Post-Industrial and Network Society configurations to realize their gains. Yet these sectors' trade in intangible goods and the riches made in that trade were hardly distributed equally; rather, they benefited only the very few, and in very few places around the globe. They have also proven extremely fragile and vulnerable, particularly in the last few years that have seen stock markets and other intangible "financial products" greatly lose value or collapse altogether.

## **The New Nature of Work: Knowledge Labor in the Digital Era**

The reorganization of labor into new forms of flexible, distributed global practices has been one of the primary characteristics of the Post-Industrial/Network/knowledge society era since it was first theorized and noted — heralded, by some, as potential freedom from the assembly floor (Bell 1973) and critiqued by others as perhaps different from, but no better than, past arrangements (Braverman 1975; Dyer-Witheford 1999; Fuchs 2010a, 2010b). These reorganizations are predicated on features such as the global flow of networked information, the proliferation of a distributed workplace organizational model and an emphasis on immaterial analytical forms of labor. Yet in some cases, the status and conditions for labor in the Post-Industrial era may, in fact, be even worse than in the past. Due to the acceleration and compression of time and space, and the global reach of networks that connect labor markets with workers, there has been in many sectors a reduction of work to its most divisible parts and to the lowest possible bids for that work, as we have seen in the case of HITs (Amazon Mechanical Turk) and digital piecework. In most cases, these functions are technologically enhanced by computerization /digitization.

What does knowledge labor, and labor under Post-Industrialism look like? Among the many insights offered in *Virtual Migration* author A. Aneesh provides the following description:

Dominating forms of labor are concerned less and less with manipulating and altering physical objects; rather, programming allows what is in effect a liquefaction of labor, by converting different forms of work . . . into code that can flow online [so that] . . . In a marriage of code and capital, labor increasingly moves in [a] code-based transnational space. (Aneesh 2006, 9)

Scholar and theorist Tiziana Terranova underscores the shift from the production of discrete material goods to a paradigm of networked knowledge work that

. . . is about the extraction of value out of continuous, updateable work, and . . . is extremely labor intensive. It is not enough to produce a good Web site, you need to update it continuously to maintain interest in it and fight off obsolescence. Furthermore, you need updateable equipment (the general intellect is always an assemblage of humans and their machines), in its turn propelled by the intense collective labor of programmers, designers, and workers. (Terranova 2000, 44)

The work is therefore cyclical, symbiotic and self-perpetuating. Further, as Terranova articulates, a fundamental shift has occurred from the Industrial to the Post-Industrial age whereby the material fabrication of machines supports knowledge labor as the product, rather than knowledge being used in the service of building of machines. Likewise, entire secondary immaterial industries, such as CCM, have developed in support of that knowledge-labor product.

Other phenomena have arisen, too, out of the digitization of work practices and the primacy of culture-making “knowledge” work, such as the rise of play or leisure activities that actually constitute work and, in many cases, may be performed without traditional remuneration to the worker (e.g., Wikipedia editing; game quality assurance testing; user-tagging and other crowd-sourced activities), and the tendency for more and more knowledge work to resemble, or be made to resemble, activities of leisure (Andrejevic 2009; Postigo 2003) or play (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2009a; Terranova 2000).

Critical digital media scholar Christian Fuchs offers a further analysis of knowledge work and workers that reveals nuance and stratification between “direct” and “indirect” workers.

According to Fuchs:

. . . direct knowledge workers (either employed as wage labour in firms or outsourced, self-employed labour) . . . produce knowledge goods and services that are sold as commodities on the market (e.g.

software, data, statistics, expertise, consultancy, advertisements, media content, films, music, etc.) and indirect knowledge workers . . . produce and reproduce the social conditions of the existence of capital and wage labour such as education, social relationships, affects, communication, sex, housework, common knowledge in everyday life, natural resources, nurture, care, etc. (Fuchs 2010a, 144)

This division maps, in many cases, to differences in socioeconomic valuations of that work, as demonstrated by wage and status differentiation. Whether direct or indirect production, Fuchs views immaterial knowledge work as a fundamental characteristic of globalized capitalism, describing the labor as that which “. . . produces and distributes information, communication, social relationships, affects, and information and communication technologies” (Fuchs 2010a, 142).

Commercial content moderation of UGC in social media may fit within the bifurcation of knowledge labor as direct or indirect described by Fuchs. Or perhaps it constitutes another, third hybrid form of immaterial knowledge labor that straddles or bridges the two, requiring both specialized cultural, social and linguistic capital, normally associated with direct production of knowledge commodities, for workers to make their judgments based on rules, social norms and taste (characteristics that seem to fall into the “direct” category) and yet does not produce categorically new knowledge, goods or services. Rather, CCM is an act of gatekeeping and curation; simply, albeit importantly, passing along material created by others — a function of replication that would fall into practices labeled by Fuchs as “indirect.” CCM labor is an act of processing.

These theoretical frameworks for knowledge labor underscore many of the greatest shifts away from past labor practices and paradigms, and into both a product of and an actor in the new

socioeconomic configurations of the knowledge-based age of the Network Society. Yet labor in the knowledge economy does not represent a complete rupture from practices of the previous era; rather, it retains key elements from the Industrial age that are sustained and enhanced by network-enabled and -enabling technologies and practices. Ursula Huws, for example, notes of call centers (a typical site of low-status immaterial labor):

In many ways, they fit the model “post-industrial” workplaces: the work is white-collar, requiring considerable amounts of knowledge to perform; it relies crucially on information and communications technology . . . . Yet it exhibits many of the features commonly supposed to epitomise “industrial” Fordist production, including Taylorist management and a work-pace determined by machines and their programmes. (Huws 2009, 5)

According to definitions developed by these and other theorists, CCM workers fit the description of knowledge workers, an artifact of the technologies of the digital network economy, although their labor differs from the high-status, high-waged creative-class knowledge workers of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Fuchs 2010a; Terranova 2000; Huws 2009; Holtgrewe et al. 2009).

Digital knowledge work represents a clear shift away from the agricultural manual labor and manufacturing and industrial production that characterized much of American economic and labor activity until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Knowledge labor relies instead on a worker’s cultural capital and ability to engage with information and communication technology. Increasingly, it relies, too, on locations other than those of the content-hosting entities providing large, cheap pools of laborers (i.e., traditional “outsourcing”), culturally and linguistically fluent in Western culture and in American English, who can be digitally networked anywhere in the world, as we shall see in the case of Caleris, a Midwestern U.S. call center.

## Calling Iowa: Caleris's Midwestern Values for Sale

Caleris is a call center offering a suite of BPO services, including content moderation of UGC. Headquartered in West Ames, Iowa, its worksites are located in several rural, formerly largely agricultural areas of the state. It touts its location and the specialized cultural sensibility of its (White, as depicted) workers through its xenophobia-tinged slogan, “Outsource to Iowa — not India.” On its website’s home screen, it uses imagery of bucolic cornfields and iconic red barns and silos to invoke Iowa’s rich history of agriculture, now largely given over to large-scale corporate agribusiness, as both enticement of and reassurance to would-be customers.



**Figure 2.4:** In 2011-2013, the Caleris homepage highlighted its location in Iowa, “not India,” as a selling point for its content moderation and call center services. Caleris has since changed its tagline to “Premium customer support from America’s heartland.” “Caleris: US Business Process Outsourcing: Inbound Call Center, Help Desk & Website Monitoring,” October 3, 2011, <http://caleris.com/>.

Call center employees in erstwhile agrarian rural Iowa exist in a space of outsourcing, competing in a global marketplace in which cultural capital may afford their company an edge — for now. Indeed, Caleris co-founder Sheldon Ohringer noted in a profile of the company that the low cost of labor and of living in rural Iowa, coupled with a perceived “lack of regional accents” (Razor 2011) on the part of the Iowa-based employees, makes the company’s

moderation services highly appealing to potential clients:

‘Iowa, often viewed as the heart of Midwestern values, has served as the perfect place to draw talented and hard-working individuals whose value systems tend to align with America’s view of what is appropriate when it comes to user-generated content,’ Ohringer said in a press release, comparing his employees with those of competitors in countries such as India. (Razor 2011).

UGC-generating Internet sites and outlets contract with Caleris, whose hourly employees spread across three rural call centers review roughly 4.5 million UGC images per day (Razor 2011). In July of 2010, the New York Times reported that workers like those at Caleris and at other for-contract content moderation sites are suffering great degrees of work-related burnout and psychological issues based on the content they see and for which they screen, which can include scenes of obscenity and profound abuse (Stone 2010). In the same story, the Times reported the following about workers at another similar firm: “Workers at Telecommunications On Demand, who make \$8 to \$12 an hour, view photos that have been stripped of information about the users who posted them. Rapidly cycling through pages of 300 images each, they are asked to flag material that is obviously pornographic or violent, illegal in a certain country or deemed inappropriate by a specific Web site” (Stone 2010). Other firms have begun offering psychological counseling to employees who find themselves disturbed and depressed by the material they must view, as a condition of their employment.

### **The Globalized Knowledge Labor Workforce: “Outsourcing” in Rhetoric and Practice**

This is not meant to suggest that the only kind of work that goes on in the digital era is knowledge labor. On the contrary, the ICT-reliant network economies are highly dependent on a great deal of heavy industry and manufacturing to meet the equipment and infrastructure needs of the work. Yet such industrial production is frequently located, through processes and

structures of globalization, around the world (typically in the Global South) in such a way to best take advantage of lenient and permissive environmental and labor laws and practices, location of natural resource extraction and cheaper labor, while simultaneously rendering that production invisible to the socioeconomically elite of the world (Dyer-Witford and de Peuter 2009b).

Such arrangements allow the Post-Industrial Era to retain the mythology of its name, an era that, in the West, appears to have evolved beyond the need for coal-belching factories of the 19th century or the mind-numbing rote tasks of the 20<sup>th</sup> century assembly line, while engaging in equally environmentally damaging manufacturing activities. Silicon Valley-based labor activist Raj Jayadev has commented on this peculiar collective myopia, saying:

A profound characteristic the popular psyche has accepted about the Information Age is the presumption that technology is produced by some sort of divine intervention so advanced that it requires no actual assembly or manufacturing, the very same features our predecessors in the Industrial Era found so essential. Yet every computer, printer, and technological wizardry in-between bought at the local Radio Shack is birthed in what is usually a very inglorious assembly line production site. (Jayadev 2001, 168)

This myopia extends, too, to the end of life of these products, frequently hidden from Western consumers via disposal at e-waste sites around the globe in sites in China, the Philippines, India, Ghana and elsewhere in the Global South (Robinson 2009; Schmidt 2006; Terazono et al. 2006).

Likewise, human intervention and immaterial labor is indeed a key, and yet equally hidden, part of the production chain in sites that rely upon user-generated uploaded content requiring screening. Commercial content moderators serve an integral role in making decisions that affect the outcome of what content will be made available on a destination site. The content



screeners also view large amounts of material that never makes it to the site it was intended for, as they deem it unfit based on site guidelines, legal prohibition, or matters of taste — labor that will literally remain unseen to anyone who may visit the site.

In many cases, great geospatial reconfigurations have taken place to facilitate this hidden manufacturing, the material and immaterial labor underpinning the knowledge economy, as Aihwa Ong (2006), David Harvey (2005), Dan Schiller (1999), and others have demonstrated. These reconfigurations frequently take the form of “special industrial zones,” or “special economic zones,” particularly in East Asia, where terms are favorable for transnational corporations to base major manufacturing operations, or for local corporations working on contract to such international concerns (Harvey 2005; Ong 2006, 84–85). Those countries that host them and the companies that take advantage of them treat these zones as being different entities from traditional sovereign nation-states.

In this sense, the phenomenon of outsourcing might mean something more complex than simply shifting work sites from one nation-state or geographic location to another. In the case of China, for example, its own internal migration of 150 million workers from primarily rural areas to the manufacturing centers frequently concentrated in these special industrial zones is greater than the transnational migration throughout the rest of the world, combined (Qiu 2009, 87). In this way, Post-Industrial labor configurations have troubled notions of nation-states, border-crossing and migration, and laborers find themselves “outsourced” in their own countries of origin, and, for example, compared directly to, as well as competing directly with, their Indian counterparts — the racialized Other — halfway around the globe.

Now these same geospatial and political reconfigurations of intra-national outsourcing and direct competition across the globe are being brought to bear in the context of knowledge

work and, specifically, in the context of online commercial content moderation. At one-tenth the population of India, the Philippines has now surpassed it in terms of actual number of workers in call centers — frequently the site of video and other kinds of commercial content moderation of UGC (Bajaj 2011).

Many of these global call center firms, such as Microsourcing, from the Philippines, solicit for online content moderation clients particularly to Western markets and in English. In this case, Microsourcing appeals to a primarily U.S.-based audience with its reference to and rather positive spin on the Philippines’ long history of colonization and cultural domination from the West, specifically and most recently from the U.S. In the copy on its website soliciting content moderation clients, the company touts its employees’ excellent command of English and their cultural immersion in Western popular culture (“thanks to their excellent English writing and communication skills . . . and their understanding of Western slang and figures of speech”) as a selling point for their services, available on a 24/7/365 basis. Elsewhere on the site, Microsourcing offers a “Virtual Captives” service for firms wishing to develop a more robust offshore team.<sup>9</sup>

The practice of user-generated content moderation at companies like Caleris and Microsourcing, both of which are BPO/call-center style “outsourcing” firms (i.e. entities other than the content-hosting entities, generally in some other location), poses profound questions about the nature of digital and knowledge labor in the Post-Industrial era, the nature of the commercialized Internet, and the phenomenon of globalization and the socioeconomic and political structures that drive it. For example, Caleris’s own slogan – “Outsource to Iowa, not

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<sup>9</sup> “Outsourcing & Offshoring to the Philippines | MicroSourcing,” accessed October 3, 2011, <http://www.microsourcing.com/>

India” — identifies the contracted labor it undertakes as a form of outsourcing, suggesting that the character and nature of the labor performed: contractual, piecework, precarious, networkable, and so on — matters more than the geographic location at which the work occurs. In the case of Caleris, for example, even though the worksites and workers remain within the geographic bounds of the United States, the company itself sees the service it provides to US companies as one of outsourcing. Therefore, outsourcing is not just a geographic concept denoted by physical-world spatial characteristics or constraints, but something else: a set of labor processes and configurations, as opposed to simply location. It is a type of work, a wage-level, a class of workers whose peripheralization is enabled and enhanced by digitization and the Internet’s “space of flows” - its cleavage with constraints of chronological time and geophysical space (Castells 2004, 146), wherever in the world they may be.



**Figure 2.5:** Microsourcing, a multi-service contract firm based in the Philippines, touts its employees’ excellent command of English and their cultural immersion in Western popular culture as a selling point for their content moderation services, available on a 24/7/365 basis. Elsewhere on the site, Microsourcing offers a “Virtual Captives” service for firms wishing to develop a more robust offshore team “Why Outsource to the Philippines? | MicroSourcing,” accessed October 3, 2011, <http://www.microsourcing.com/company/outsourcing-philippines.asp>

At the same time, both the rhetoric and the practice of outsourcing rely upon a transnational bridging of low-wage, low-status and contractual labor. Under this logic it therefore becomes reasonable for a company such as Caleris to first identify its direct competition as not

another Midwestern state with similar socioeconomic, political and cultural characteristics (e.g., Illinois; Wisconsin), but India — and to then differentiate itself from India, the Other, by selling its services on the basis of Caleris' cultural intangibles that are as American as the red barn and Midwestern farm depicted on its homepage.

What can certainly be stated unequivocally is that human intervention and immaterial labor are indeed a key, and yet frequently hidden, part of the production chain in online sites that rely upon user-generated uploaded content to populate and draw in their producers / users / consumers. Content moderators, whose labor and even mere existence are so frequently hidden from view, nevertheless serve an integral role in making decisions that affect the outcome of what content will be made available on a destination site. Given the financial implications and attention a viral video can have, the tasks performed by these workers are far from inconsequential. Commercial content screeners also view large amounts of material that never makes it to the site it was intended for, as they deem it unfit based on site guidelines, legal prohibition, or matters of taste — labor that will literally remain unseen to anyone who may visit the site. While the moderators' work may not be as physically demanding or dangerous as that of those workers whose labor goes into IT hardware manufacturing, it indeed is often as disregarded, unmentioned or unacknowledged — and has its own potential for psychological damage, in terms of the nature of the material to which the moderators may be exposed.

### **Digital Piecework at Facebook**

Against the backdrop of a much publicized and, ultimately, troubled IPO, Facebook made a smaller splash in the news in 2012, when facts about its UGC moderation practices came to light via the online news and entertainment website Gawker. Several UGC digital pieceworkers performing content screening on microlabor sites contacted Gawker staff journalist Adrian Chen.

The workers, who reviewed UGC for oDesk on behalf of Facebook, provided Chen with internal documents from oDesk describing Facebook's content screening standards and practices that highlighted disturbing aspects of what the workers were required to see.

Chen's subsequent story, entitled, "Inside Facebook's Outsourced Anti-Porn and Gore Brigade, Where 'Camel Toes' are More Offensive Than Crushed Heads," (Chen 2012) was remarkable in a number of ways: first, he was able to focus on real-world examples shared with him by the workers themselves, most of whom are no longer working for Facebook via oDesk as digital pieceworkers, and many of whom are located outside the US (primarily in the "Global South"). The workers' accounts give concrete examples of both the kinds of egregious and trauma-inducing material they were exposed to while being paid digital piecework-level wages that would seem to be nowhere near reasonable, given the psychological hazards of the work.

Secondly, the workers provided Chen with a number of internal documents from oDesk, used for training and quality control by the content screeners. This type of material is generally not available for public view and is considered proprietary information by both the companies providing CCM and those that contract for moderation of UGC destined for their sites. But protecting this information as trade secrets also obscures other issues, allowing a company to maintain ambiguity about its screening and censoring practices. More general "user guideline"-style statements give plenty of room in which to operate when making subjective content screening decisions. This particular angle was another focus of Chen's piece, where he pointed out the strange hierarchy of UGC material, and how it was to be adjudicated by the screeners.

While Chen's piece, and subsequent takes on it in the blogosphere (Webster 2012) and in other sensationalistic coverage online, focused on the admittedly disconcerting nature of the

material Facebook rejects, just below that aspect of the story were even more compelling facts.<sup>10</sup>

For example, the oDesk internal documents provide a great deal of insight into the kinds of material that the low-paid contract laborers would be expected to see.<sup>11</sup> Images and videos of animal abuse and mutilation, child abuse (physical and sexual), gore, disturbing racist imagery and so on are frequent enough that all have specialized protocols devoted to handling them — keeping them from making it to the site if they are not yet there, and removing them, if they are.



**Figure 2.6:** A confusing infographic released by Facebook, designed to elucidate the route that content takes through the screening circuit Alexei Oreskovic, "Facebook Reporting Guide Shows How Site Is Policed (INFOGRAPHIC)," June 19, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/20/facebook-reporting-guide\\_n\\_1610917.html?s=935139](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/20/facebook-reporting-guide_n_1610917.html?s=935139).

Not long after news about Facebook moderation via oDesk broke, Facebook released a

<sup>10</sup> Daily Mail Reporter. "Facebook's Bizarre and Secretive 'Graphic Content' Policy Revealed in Leaked Document." *Daily Mail*, February 21, 2012. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2104424/Facebooks-bizarre-secretive-graphic-content-policy-revealed-leaked-document.html?ito=feeds-newsxml>

<sup>11</sup> "Abuse Standards 6.1: Operation Manual for Live Content Operators." 81863464-oDeskStandards.pdf, n.d. Available at <http://mirrors.random.sh>

confusing infographic ostensibly designed to shed light on the cryptic route that reported content takes through the company's circuit of screening (Oreskovic 2012; figure 2.6). According to the company, content flagged as inappropriate, for any one of myriad reasons, makes its way to “. . . staffers in several offices around the world to handle the millions of user reports it receives every week about everything from spam to threats of violence”(Oreskovic 2012). Reasons cited in the infographic that may cause material to be reported include content that is sexually explicit, involves harm to self or others, depicts graphic violence, contains hate speech, and so on.

What is missing, however, from Facebook's infographic and accompanying statement is any suggestion of how much content is routed through this circuit, and how significant a problem routinely addressing inappropriate UGC tends to be. Critically lacking, for example, is a discussion of the status or the working conditions of the “staffers. . . around the world” who contend with this distressing material as a major function of their job. Facebook employs microlabor sites such as oDesk and others to conduct these moderation and review practices. The workers engage in digital piecework offered on microwork sites, and are therefore afforded no protections or benefits whatsoever. Further, their physical and geographical isolation from each other as workers means that they cannot support or commiserate with each other about the content they view as a condition of their work, a key coping mechanism for the CCM workers in Chapter 5.

In this way, Facebook benefits from the lack of accountability that comes with outsourcing, that is, introducing secondary and tertiary contracting firms into the cycle of production — a fact that is critically absent from the infographic. Workers engaged as moderators through digital piecework sites are isolated, with few (if any) options for connecting — for emotional support as well as for labor organizing — with other workers in similar

conditions, and without any real connection to the original worksites from which the content emanates.

Another little-publicized aspect of outsourcing is that, while the microwork sites and the major corporations that engage them may tout the ability to draw on expertise from a global labor marketplace, in practice these temporary work relationships result in lost payroll-tax revenue for countries such as the US when labor is outsourced from it, and in significant increases in these kinds of labor pools in Greece and Spain, countries devastated by economic crisis and crippling “austerity” measures (Hardy 2012). Indeed, the worldwide marketplace for digital piecework allows for bargain-basement rates that drive the value of the labor down to the lowest global bidder, by design. The connection between economic crisis in a region and an increase in the availability of competent labor that is exceedingly cheap cannot be lost here.

Of course, one cannot reasonably expect Facebook, Caleris, oDesk or any other company to ease the way for workers to organize and push back against damaging work conditions and unfair labor arrangements; this, after all, is one of the purposes of outsourcing and using intermediaries to supply the labor pool in the first place, along with the lack of regulation and oversight that these arrangements also offer. In response, non-traditional organization among workers in these sectors is taking place, such as in India, where UNITES Professionals has issued a charter for IT and call center workers.<sup>12</sup> In the United Kingdom, the Precarious Workers’ Brigade focuses on educational and cultural workers, but their model and scope could conceivably be extended to workers engaged in screening and moderation.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “Unites Professionals.” Accessed April 4, 2014. <http://unitespro.org/> See particularly their “About” page.

<sup>13</sup> “PRECARIOUS WORKERS BRIGADE.” Accessed May 4, 2012. <http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/>



## **Why Commercial Content Moderation Matters**

CCM is a central and mission-critical activity in the workflow of online digital media production, yet it is little known, frequently low-wage / low-status, and generally outsourced. Content moderation ensures brand protection, adherence to terms of use statements, site guidelines and legal regimes (e.g., copyright; law enforcement). It is a key part of the production chain of commercial sites and social media platforms, yet companies often distance themselves from this work and dislike publicity around their moderation practices.

CCM troubles notions of the Internet as a free-speech zone. It introduces the existence of actors unknown to and unseen by the vast majority of end-users who are nevertheless critical in the production chain of social media-making decisions. Their invisible presence disrupts Web 2.0 notions predicated on the one-to-one relationship of user-to-platform. It paints a disturbing view of an unpleasant work task that the existence of social media and the commercial, regulated Internet, in general, necessitate.

Commercial content moderation is a globalized outsourced labor practice. The same geospatial and political reconfigurations that spawned manufacturing “special industrial zones,” or “special economic zones,” particularly in East Asia are being brought to bear in the context of content moderation in global outsourcing firms. Many of these global call center firms solicit for online content moderation clients in English and in Western markets, appealing to relationships with the sites’ countries of origin based on histories of colonial and cultural dominance, and providing favorable terms for companies that relocate portions of their business there (Poster 2007, 274).

CCM puts workers in difficult and even damaging working conditions. By its very nature, screeners repeatedly view large amounts of material deemed unfit for publication on sites

according to their own guidelines, legal prohibition or matters of taste. While the moderators' work may not be as physically demanding or dangerous as that of workers in other areas of the social media production chain, such as manufacturing or waste disposal, it is often just as invisible to end users and has its own potential for psychological damage to the workers who undertake the task.

It reflects and relies upon new labor forms, and represents new trends in labor formulation, facilitated by as well as predicated on digital technologies and the arrangements they engender. Content moderation is frequently performed by contract laborers working for outsourcing companies, predicated on a globally connected, 24/7 digital infrastructure for production of material to review and the means to send it around the world for moderation. It also relies on microlabor markets such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, where knowledge work is divided and farmed out into its smallest component parts as digital piecework.

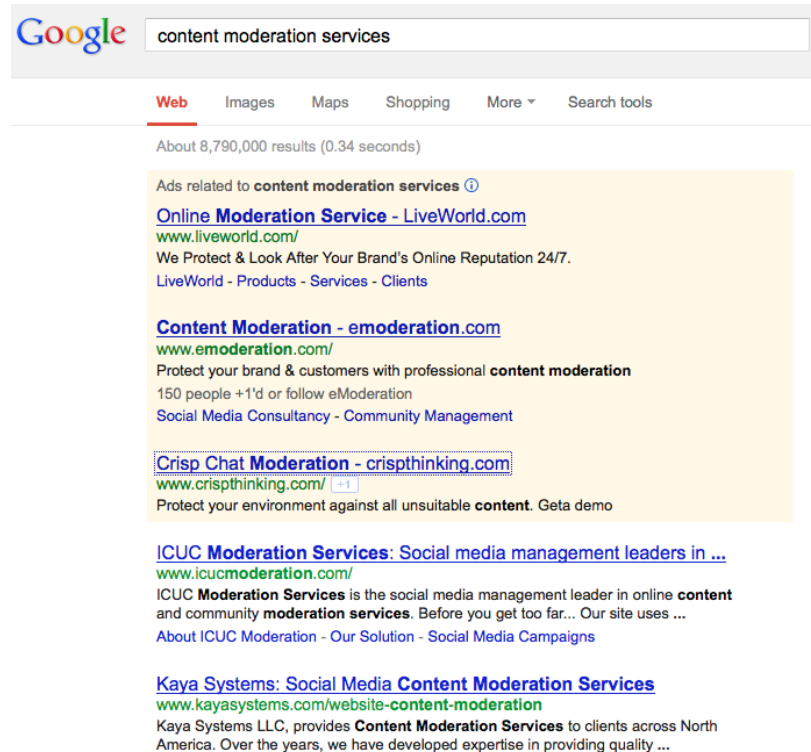
Early theorists of the Post-Industrial age such as Daniel Bell envisioned the morphing of the Industrial 20<sup>th</sup> century into the Post-Industrial 21<sup>st</sup> century as one ripe with possibility for greater flexibility, mobility, higher status work and more leisure time for American workers, who would shift to using their analytical and technical acumen developed from their production abilities and migrate into a knowledge-based economy of high-status, high-wage work. Yet the vision promulgated by Bell and the technological deterministic futurists who came in his wake has increasingly ceded to a different reality. Rather than elevating the workers of the world, 21<sup>st</sup> century configurations of labor are undergoing a kind of globalized race to the bottom in search of ever cheaper, faster and more human and material resources in order for businesses to compete in the globalized, 24/7 networked marketplace.

Finally, while there has been a great emphasis and primacy placed on knowledge work

under Post-Industrial social arrangements, heavy industry and manufacturing of all sorts is still alive and critically important, even to the knowledge economy, suggesting a shift rather than supersession. The Post-Industrial labor economy has demanded great geospatial rearrangements and migrations of people, whose “flexibility” is often synonymous with “instability,” or even “marginality.” To paraphrase Tiziana Terranova , labor under the knowledge economy may just not be as fun as it’s made out to be (2000, 33). In order to contend with what is wrong with labor under the current socioeconomic structures, with the purpose of bettering it, we must continue to unveil the realities of labor in the knowledge and digital economies, on a global scale and in all strata. It is therefore to that end that this study contributes.

### Chapter 3: Method: Talking to the Moderators: On Interviewing

After coming to know about commercial content moderation as an emergent practice and industry, in mid-2010 I began to perform quarterly keyword searches via Google for content moderation companies advertising online, using phrases like “video content moderation,” “content screening,” “content moderation services,” and so on.



**Figure 3.1:** Example search page result from a Google search for companies offering moderation services.

I began to track these companies, noticing that some would disappear and others appear in the search results and in their web presences, and noting, whenever possible, their location in the world. The goal was to both get a sense for the companies engaging enough in commercial moderation work that they were soliciting online for customers for their services, as well as to identify potential sites for locating workers involved in the industry as moderators.

That second point was critical to the next step of the research: identifying and locating workers in the field of content moderation is difficult, as they are typically not highly visible, by

the nature of the industry. A first attempt to contact workers laboring at the Iowa-based call center-style firm, Caleris, failed. While I was able to post flyers soliciting study participants and talk to influential community members in the form of local public librarians in the communities I was targeting about my interest in the workers and the nature of my study, I had no volunteers willing to participate in interviews, and travel to the area without interviews already set up was cost- and time-prohibitive. It also seemed possible that the recent press around Caleris might have ricocheted through similar Midwestern BPO call centers doing CCM, and that workers might have been warned against talking to media and/or researchers. Clearly, I needed an alternative recruitment strategy.

In early June of 2012, I traveled to the East Coast and used my own personal-professional network to gain access to two people who had knowledge of the practice through firsthand experience. One had served as an early in-house online community manager for a digital news site, responsible for reviewing, approving and deleting text-based comments that infringed on community terms of use or that she judged to be otherwise inflammatory. She reviewed all comments posted to the news stories and community fora on the digital general-interest news site. The other participant had been an executive at the same digital news company, responsible for dealing with the content moderation needs of the firm from an organization-wide management perspective: brand management, staffing, logistics. These two lengthy interviews, performed in person, served as my first two experiences gathering data for research on CCM worker experience. Both individuals offered a wealth of insights and were eager to discuss their experiences with CCM from their specific position-related perspectives.

Meanwhile, snowball sampling yielded an unexpected contact with a person who recognized an acquaintance's employment as being that of CCM. I connected with the employee,

which yielded three interviews with current and former in-house contract employees of a major Silicon Valley social media firm, conducted between August 2012 and January 2013.

Research Site	Site Type	Site Location	Number of Participants	Interview Type
Site A: MegaTech	In-house social media company	Silicon Valley, CA, US	3	Skype
Site B: OnlineExperts	Boutique social media management firm	Based in Canada; employees dispersed around the globe	2	Skype
Site C: Diginews Corp.	In-house digital news firm	East Coast, US	2	In-person

**Table 3.1:** An overview of the interviews conducted, June 2012-January 2013.

Finally, I returned to the information I had been systematically gathering regarding companies soliciting for content moderation clients on Google. I cold-contacted several firms via email. The current Chief Operations Officer (COO) at a Canadian boutique moderation firm, responsible for all of its moderation activities, and a former moderator himself responded to my inquiry. I interviewed the COO, as well as a moderation worker from the company from a list of several contacts he provided, conducting the final interview with that moderator, based in Scotland but moderating almost exclusively for North American English-language firms, in January of 2013.

### **Interview Tools and Practices**

In the first two cases, I was able to conduct in-person interviews, thanks to the serendipity of a travel schedule that put me in close proximity to the participants. In other cases, I employed Skype, an Internet-based video-conferencing platform. All the participants were familiar users of Skype, and reported comfort using Skype as our platform of choice. Indeed, the ability to connect remotely through a digital means greatly facilitated this research. I used additional software to digitally record the audio feed from the Skype application itself, with the

permission of the interview participants. This allowed for the creation of detailed and accurate text-based transcriptions following the interviews, to be analyzed later. I used the same digital recording software to record live, in-person conversations. Periodically, I followed up with participants for clarification, when needed, via email.

After each interview, I wrote extensive memos to myself based on the interview experience, a critical aspect of grounded theory. These memos reflected on what the interviewees said, their demeanor, how they had responded non-verbally through the interviews, how we related to each other, areas of discussion that stood out, and topics that seemed important or sensitive to them. In addition, I used the memos as a site to document my own perspectives about and reactions to what the workers reported, to be later coded and included in study analyses. This perspective was important, as there were times when workers' words seemed to belie the reality of their situations, such as when they reported they experienced no real harm from their daily work, and yet, in the next breath, described instances in which the work was, indeed, clearly affecting them in a negative way.

I also learned industry terms, cultural norms and acronyms of which I was previously unaware (e.g., UGC, or user-generated content) and detailed information about the mechanics of the CCM process from the workers via our interviews and lengthy conversations. I was able to therefore develop a fluidity and comfort level with the industry- and work-specific terms that engendered and facilitated later conversations. This facility with the language of their everyday work environment certainly helped to establish a rapport and credibility with the participants that was so critical to the success of the interview process. I was not only relying on them to provide me with details about their work life and workplaces, but also asked them to grant me access to their work colleagues in a process of snowball sampling, when possible. I was, in essence, asking

them to vet participation in the study and, ultimately, to vet me. For their participation and willingness to encourage others to talk to me, I am profoundly grateful.

### **On Anonymity, Participant Protection and Ethics**

A primary concern was to maintain anonymity of participants, as well as to be extremely sensitive and attuned to their well-being. In several cases, the content moderators who spoke to me were in direct violation of Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs), which they were required to sign and to abide by as a condition of their employment. These NDAs precluded them from speaking with any non-designated parties about the details or specifics of their work. Workers were sensitive to the potential for being identified and its ramifications in the form of potential termination of their employment. I sought to protect participant anonymity, while still keeping some general information that would give readers a sense of the nature of the worksite; identifying a site as being a social media firm in Silicon Valley, for example, connotes certain socioeconomic and cultural realities and norms that it was important to include.

Interviews were conducted at the convenience of each participant. We chose times during which the participants were not at work, and were located in private or semi-private locations; in each case, the participant chose to speak to me from his or her own home. Institutional Research Board exemption from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was sought and received in March of 2012. All workers received a consent form that they read and signed, and then we discussed it together before beginning the interviews, with participants asking questions and sharing any concerns they had. All worksites, worker names, and other information that could lead to the identification of specific participants or their companies of employment were removed from the content to be drawn on for the final study, in which workers are identified by pseudonyms only.



I operated under an imperative of “do no (further) harm” to these workers, based on their participation in the study. The interview protocol was designed expressly to avoid directly asking about the details of salacious topics or to ask for specifics about the disturbing content they had seen (e.g., avoiding asking questions such as, “Tell me about the worst thing you ever came across on the job”). There were two reasons for this. First, print and online journalism outlets were beginning to cover the story from this angle and seemed to be doing an adequate job. While the disturbing nature of the content was certainly an important element of the workers’ story, it was but a part of the whole picture. Second, directly asking workers questions of this nature could very easily introduce the potential for further trauma. From an ethical perspective, it was my goal to avoid bringing the workers into contact with further negative experiences as a consequence of taking part in the study. For the most part, this effort seemed to be successful; in some cases, the nature of the disturbing and traumatic material workers dealt with on the job came out through the course of conversation anyway. In a few other cases, workers expressed relief at being able to discuss their work experiences with someone unconnected to their workplace, but who cared about their welfare, and about raising the profile of content moderators, in general. It is not possible to be certain that no harm was done to the workers in talking about the moderating that they do, but I exercised great care to be respectful and cautious whenever discussing sensitive or upsetting subjects relating to the material the participants see on a daily basis.

### **Reading for Meaning: Reviewing CCM Online Trade Press, Industry and Corporate Promotional Materials Using CDA/CTDA**

An additional important source of information about CCM, a nascent and dispersed practice that takes place in numerous sites and in a multitude of configurations worldwide (as we

have seen in Chapter 2), were the many corporate websites dedicated to solicitation of CCM business, articles in trade publications that cover industries in which CCM takes place (such as the BPO sector), and business press articles discussing CCM practices themselves and the companies that provide them. It was these sources that revealed a great deal of information about the nature of CCM, particularly in light of a lack of scholarly or academic writing or research on this emerging industry. For this reason, companies' own solicitation of CCM business was a great source of insight into the stratified nature of the industries in which CCM practices take place, into what services were offered and in what context. Online business and trade press, with a very few exceptions, provided the only literature on CCM practices and the workers who undertake it. Along with information participants provided to me in interviews, these materials were key to helping me formulate the theoretical discussion of CCM undertaken in Chapter 2.

For purposes of this study, I engaged in a close reading of these texts whenever possible, guided by two related methods designed for providing mechanisms for the close reading and interpretation of various types of texts, including visual imagery: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Gee 2011; Fairclough 2010; T. Van Dijk 1993), and Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA). In the following section, I describe the ways in which these methods and mechanisms provide insights that would have otherwise been unavailable to me in my study of CCM, and allowed me to make meaning from the corporate websites and materials I pored over in the course of attempting to apprehend CCM in both concept and practice.

As James Paul Gee notes in his work on discourse analysis for images:

We live in a digital age awash in images and texts that combine words and images. Texts that combine words and images are often called "multimodal texts," because they combine different modes like language, images, and music . . . ads, music videos, and video

games are obvious examples. (Gee 2011, 187)

The importance of closely reading and examining image-based multimodal texts therefore becomes critical when images serve as a central part of the communication apparatus, as they do on the Web — particularly on those sites that fulfill an advertising or business solicitation role, as the sites described in this research do. Gee describes this examination process as a critical site for potential meaning-making:

As with language, any image communicates (has meaning) only in context and leaves much “unsaid,” assuming it will be filled in by people’s knowledge of the context, including their cultural knowledge and former experience with such images . . . images, just like when we speak or write in language, are always part of Discourses, if the images are meaningful and communicative. Images are associated with words, settings, and other sorts of objects in the service of letting people enact or recognize different sorts of socially-significant identities and activities (practices). (Gee 2011, 188-189)

Additionally, André Brock’s Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) provides a mechanism and process for analysis of and meaning-making from online artifacts (such as corporate websites), specifically in the context of a “sociocultural matrix” (Brock 2009, 345) related to issues of race, globalization, gender, class and related sociocultural categories of meaning.

Brock gives the following overview of CTDA:

CTDA analyzes interfaces to understand how the Internet’s form and function visually, symbolically, and interactively mediate discourse. I assembled this analytical approach by following Nakamura’s (2006) prescription for cyberculture research. Her argument is that cyberculture studies lacks a theoretical framework

for embedding studies of the Internet into the “contemporary constellation of racism, globalization, and technoculture” (p. 30) within which it exists. Nakamura’s solution is to employ critical race and cultural theory to analyze popular Internet objects and the interactions surrounding them. (Brock 2009, 345; citing Lisa Nakamura 2006)

This work is further taken up by Miriam Sweeney in her doctoral dissertation (Sweeney 2013). In that work, Sweeney examined the Ms. Dewey search interface on the basis of its evocation and appeal to racialized and gendered elements, using CTDA to guide her close reading of the interface and the cultural aspects and symbols that made up Ms. Dewey and that the interface played upon. She described her process, citing Brock, as follows:

My version of interface analysis is influenced by Brock’s (2009) Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA), a bifurcated approach that “combines insight into the cultural biases encoded within technologies alongside insights into the technological biases encoded within the culture of the users” (Brock, 2011). In this study I am focusing solely on Brock’s articulation of the interface analysis approach, which addresses “how the Internet’s form and function visually, symbolically, and interactively mediate discourse” (Brock, 2009, p. 354). CTDA is an ideal methodological approach for interrogating Ms. Dewey, since it advocates interrogating culture and technology simultaneously as intertwined concepts using critical cultural frameworks. (Sweeney 2013, 59, citing Brock 2011; Brock 2009)

For this study, the notion of the way in which CCM was presented visually and symbolically was a key mechanism in bringing out the broader meanings of CCM practice according to the discourse of its purveyors.

The way in which companies such as Caleris, for example, solicited business for their

CCM and other BPO services, was predicated on an underlying appeal to cultural supremacy that was revealed in their website's tagline, "Outsource to Iowa, not India." The racialized, xenophobic tones and the siting of Caleris in a globalized BPO marketplace that is more likely to relate itself to Gurgaon than to Manhattan are made clear by the kind of close reading that CTDA provides. These close readings of corporate websites and other industry and trade materials through the CTDA lens has allowed for a richer and more nuanced understanding of CCM. Indeed, companies' own promotions of their CCM services have served as important informants in their own right on the nature of CCM, how it is sold to other businesses, and how it is viewed by those seeking and those offering its services. Even with the rich interviews provided by the CCM worker participants, without a close reading, guided by CDA/CTDA principles, of how CCM firms view the services they offer — and how they present / view the workers who perform it — my insight into the nature of how CCM firms position themselves (in various sectors and in a globalized marketplace) would have been limited.

In other words, the CCM companies that use websites to communicate with potential clients are using the sites' imagery and text in combination to say something about the services they offer. In this way, the serene farm scene depicted on the Caleris website, with its tagline text of "Outsource to Iowa, not India," takes on even greater importance in terms of what it hopes potential clients will fill in — a transmitted image – and verbally-based understanding of what is suggested by a stereotypical representation of farmland in rural Iowa (White; Midwestern conservative values and cultural context; native speakers of colloquial American English considered neutral in accent and lexicon, etc.) and the potential monetary value, in the form of business and contracts, of that context in the CCM world.

By engaging in a close reading of the Caleris website using CDA/CTDA techniques, one

comes to understand that Caleris offers much more than simple CCM services: it provides CCM services, but its expertise and means of differentiation lies in the very identities of its workers. Further, Caleris offers the potential CCM customer a useful contrast and foil by directly referencing India, long a source of BPO activities for English-speaking markets and commonly derided in American popular culture as providing an inferior (read: foreign) customer service experience. “Who would want to outsource there?” Caleris asks, through its slogan and imagery.

Likewise, website image/texts from firms based in the Philippines provided equally illuminating insight when examined through the close reading called for by CDA and the sociocultural matrix invoked by CTDA: a complex relationship to call center work predicated on years of colonial, cultural and economic domination by the United States. These websites frequently invoked characteristics apparently intrinsic, the site copy suggested, to all Filipino workers: hard-working, knowledgeable of American English and popular culture, happy to work in an American cultural context and in a call-center setting, and offering teams of workers it described as “virtual captives.”<sup>14</sup>

When it comes to CCM practice, it is the cultural content and competencies of the body of workers that is actually for sale. Yet perhaps the most fascinating revelation was the fact that the CCM workers themselves are engaged in a constant and rapid process of close reading; they search user-generated images, texts, word strings and videos for content and concepts that fall out of the sociocultural norms for the audiences for whom the content is destined, and often are called upon to embody norms that are, to the workers themselves, foreign and non-indigenous. This is a concept that will be taken up further in Chapters 5 and 6, in which I analyze the responses and observations of the workers themselves and discuss their implications.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://ezinearticles.com/?What-Is-a-Virtual-Captive?&id=5036166>

Close readings of these texts proved instrumental in formulating theoretical notions of the structure of firms that participate in CCM practices, and how they view themselves and each other. These multimodal texts are revelatory and speak volumes about the sociocultural values that are embedded in CCM practices, and have informed key insights in this study.

## **Challenges**

The first, and greatest, challenge to this portion of the study was simply in locating study participants: people involved in the commercial UGC moderation industry. I knew that in-depth interviews are an excellent way of capturing the lived experience of a research participant in his or her own words, recognizing the interviewee as an integral member of the research team without whom the research would not be possible. For this reason, I felt that the method could be extremely fruitful in coming to understand CCM through subsequent analysis that would provide a larger picture about commercial content moderation and its workers.

I was concerned, however, about notions of a “representative sample” and the lack of randomness in selection of study participants. My concern was not wanting to address this concept from a statistical or quantitative approach; rather, I wanted to adequately collect a breadth of experiences that would serve as a legitimate methodological basis from which to analyze CCM. In Irving Seidman’s *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, the author addressed both of these concerns as they related to the qualitative interview process: “True randomness would be prohibitive in an in-depth interview study . . . interview participants must consent to be interviewed, so there is always an element of self-selection in an interview study. Self-selection and randomness are not compatible” (Seidman 2005, 51). Seidman goes on to discuss the issue of representative sampling:

The job of an in-depth interviewer is to go to such depth in the interviews that surface considerations of representativeness and

generalizability are replaced by a compelling evocation of an individual's experience . . . the researcher find[s] connections among the experiences of the individuals he or she interviews. Such links among people whose individual lives are quite different but who are affected by common structural and social forces can help the reader see patterns in that experience. The researcher calls those connections to the readers' attention for inspection and exploration. (Seidman 2005, 52)

Another challenge arose in attempting to apprehend the true size, scope and valuation of the industry. This is something that executives in the industry to whom I spoke felt that even they could not do, citing the hidden nature of the practice and general secrecy in place among the companies who trade in moderation services. There are no trade associations or other easy mechanisms to find out information about the breadth and scope of CCM, or where and in what contexts it takes place, in an exhaustive way. Yet valuation of companies for whom CCM is a key function and business practice is possible; review of stock price, market capitalization and cash on hand of publicly-traded companies might be one way to evaluate aspects of the financial impacts on the companies that engage CCM as a vital part of their digital media chain of production, and is an avenue for potential future research.

Understanding what workers were reporting as fully as possible was also an important and challenging dimension of the research. The element of interviewing via video or in person was critical here, as I was also able to be cognizant of body language, facial expression and other non-verbal cues that proved relevant to the discussions and in elucidating meaning from what the workers shared.

Finally, I faced a challenge in terms of the nature of workers whom I could easily recruit for the study. Those who were most accessible to me were Western, located primarily in North



America and English-speaking, working at in-house and boutique sites, as opposed to call centers in locations in geographically- and culturally-distant parts of the world, or workers participating in the fleeting digital piecework space of the online microlabor market sites. In my future research, I will therefore seek to expand the scope of workers contacted in order to engage with workers in other work and socio-cultural contexts, and in other parts of the world, in order to address this gap in understanding of worker experience. I anticipate access to workers to be an ongoing challenge; in November of 2013, I was interviewed about my research on CCM by NPR (Hersher 2013). Both in private conversation as well as in the final story that aired, the reporter acknowledged that she approached major U.S.-based tech firms and asked to talk to their in-house CCM workers. All the companies she approached declined her request. It is therefore likely that I will have to employ other means of access, besides going directly through a company's front door (or Media Relations department) to gain access to workers, while continuing to maintain strict confidentiality and anonymity for those who participate in studies.

### **The Grounded Theory Approach**

A primary qualitative methodological framework guiding this inquiry is that of grounded theory, which is “. . . based on the systematic generating of theory from data, that itself is systematically obtained from social research” (Glaser 1978, 2). It is employed alongside in-depth qualitative interviews with current and former content moderation workers (Seidman 2005). The interviews provide a ground-level view of the lived experience and (self-)perceptions of those performing the hidden work of content moderation and screening, and the resulting impact of that work on their lives.

Citing Glaser and Strauss (1967), Steven Pace describes grounded theory as a

. . . primarily inductive investigative process in which the researcher formulates a theory about a phenomenon by

systematically gathering and analysing relevant data. The aim of this research method is building theory, not testing theory. Rather than begin a study with a preconceived theory that needs to be proven, the researcher begins with a general area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data. (Pace 2004, 332)

Such an approach is therefore particularly instructive when examining relatively new or unstudied phenomena, formulating a more expansive research agenda or launching a preliminary inquiry, all characteristics that describe this study. As Glaser notes:

The grounded theory method . . . can be easily used as a general method of analysis with any form of data collection: survey, experiment, case study . . . the generative nature of grounded theory constantly opens up the mind of the analyst to a myriad of new possibilities for research, for ideas, for other substantive areas of endeavor, for formal theories, for projects and for variations in method. (Glaser 1978, 6)

Grounded theory approaches have therefore served as a natural fit for developing theoretical insights regarding CCM work and workers' experiences; it is a nascent industry and the experiences of the workers are, to my knowledge, undocumented and unanalyzed in the context of scholarly work. Such a site of inquiry is a natural place to begin to gather evidence for analysis and theory formulation, as grounded theory's structures facilitate.

Building on Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory framework (1967), and using medical sociologist Kathy Charmaz's grounded theory and qualitative analysis handbook as a guide (Charmaz 2006), I recruited a number of current and former content moderation workers to serve as participants in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Following the theoretical perspective and guidelines for the practical implementation of a grounded theory-based study, the interview protocol was designed to elicit complex, multilayered responses from participants.

The questions served as a framework and a jumping-off place for discussion, but were not meant to be all-encompassing or comprehensive; much of the follow-on questions and the general direction of the interviews were dependent upon the respondents' own guidance, knowledge and comfort in sharing particular aspects of their work and personal lives. The semi-structured nature of the interviews, as called for in a grounded theory approach, allows for open-ended questions that can, themselves, generate follow-up questions and conversation threads leading in unplanned or surprising directions.

The following list therefore served as the guiding interview protocol, but the actual interviews themselves included variation in questions asked and topics discussed.

<b>Interview Protocol Questions</b>	<b>Follow-on Questions</b>
1. How did you come to be employed at [research site A/B/C]?	How did you hear about the job opening? What did you know about it before starting?
2. What did you do before you worked here?	
3. How long have you been with [site A/B/C]? What positions have you held at the company?	
4. Tell me about your typical workday.	
5. What are some of your job duties?	
6. How does the process of content screening/content moderation work?	From a technical perspective? What are the steps you go through when screening?
7. What kind of job training did you have in preparation for this position?	Can you describe the training process?
8. What kinds of skills do you have that make you good at and for this job?	
9. What kinds of things/themes/material are you screening for or screening out?	
10. What were your expectations for this job before you started?	What kind of work did you think you would be doing? How does that compare with what you actually do?
11. How do you feel about your work?	
12. What aspects of your work make you feel proud about what you do?	
13. How does your work make you feel?	

**Table 3.2:** The interview protocol used as the basis for each of the seven interviews.

### **Coding and Qualitative Analysis**

Both during and after the completion of the interview phase of the inquiry, I processed

the informants' responses by transcribing interviews and performing analyses (i.e., coding) on those transcriptions using the constant comparative method, as outlined by Glaser (1965), Glaser and Strauss (1967), Strauss and Corbin (1998), as well as Charmaz (2006), for her constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 1983). Charmaz describes this as a practice that acknowledges and “. . . fosters researchers' reflexivity about their *own* interpretations as well as those of their research participants,” cautious and aware that “. . . both data and analyses are social constructions that reflect what their production entailed” (2006, 131).

For this portion of the study, I enlisted the services of Dedoose,<sup>15</sup> a mixed-methods analysis software package that allows for the thematic coding of interview data, in my case in a text-based form. The interviews were transcribed so that they could be appropriately anonymized and then subsequently coded and analyzed iteratively in their text form.

The process of coding the interview and memo data was iterative and ongoing. This approach yields a result described in grounded theory as “theoretical sampling.” Charmaz describes it thusly: “Theoretical sampling involves starting with the data, constructing tentative ideas about the data, and then examining these ideas through further empirical inquiry” (2006, 102). Engaging in theoretical sampling allows for a dialog of analysis to emerge among all the participants' interviews, among the researcher's memos describing those interviews, and between the two corpora.

While the interviews themselves are conducted with individuals, the focus is not on the individuals' experience as such, nor does that experience stand on its own in the context of this study. Instead, the process of iterative, constant comparative coding and theoretical sampling utilized throughout the ongoing data analysis process further hones and refines the emergent

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<sup>15</sup> “Qualitative Research Data Analysis Software from Dedoose,” <http://www.dedoose.com/>.

patterns, categories and themes articulated through the gathered data. The process of coding has been fluid and iterative, and one of finding linkages and tendencies across the data. The resulting linkages, emergent themes and shared insights have served as the basis for the development of the theoretical framing of CCM work sites found in Chapter 2, as well as the theoretical discussion in Chapter 4 of the nature of the Internet and claims about it as a site of free expression and democratic exchange, versus its reality as a curated, mediated and surveyed space.

### **Affordances and Opportunities for Future Research**

The work of in-depth semi-structured interviews, concurrent grounded theory-based coding, and thematic, theoretical sampling has allowed this study to place great emphasis on gaining an understanding of content moderators' work lives, at least as they are manifested in the context of the three sites from which my participants hailed. Coupled with CTDA, the resulting analysis, in combination with Chapters 2, 5 and 6 of the study, provide a rich picture of the context and character of the CCM industry, its place in the wider political economy of the Internet, its relationship to other globalized, transnational labor practices such as outsourcing and virtual migration, as well as how it troubles the concept of the Internet as a democratizing free-speech zone. As one of its major contributions, this study documents and provides an aggregate ground-level view of the lived experience and (self-)perceptions of those performing the hidden work of content moderation and screening, and the resulting impact of that work on their lives.

I will of course continue this research into the foreseeable future. The practice of interviewing in a face-to-face capacity can be undertaken in person or over Skype (or a similar video conferencing platform) in order to expand the study to further sites, or to further areas in the world. Gathering worker experience and insight via semi-structured, in-depth interviews has

been a positive and successful process, and has achieved my goal of letting workers speak and articulate their own work experiences.

Taking this basic study as a framework, a comparative analysis would now be possible in another part of the world. The Philippines is for the moment the main site of call center activity, and call centers are now beginning to branch out into moderation services. I hope to be able to travel there in order to meet and engage with the CCM workers who make up that country's massive call center workforce, and to hear the perspective of workers who were frequently dismissed by the Western CCM workers that I interviewed. Such a study would provide critical context to what I have been able to undertake to date, and I look forward to pursuing it as the next facet of my research into CCM.

## **Chapter 4: Of Platforms, Protocol and People: Enclosure, Surveillance and Control in the Contemporary Internet Age**

*"The Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it." — John Gilmore, 1993<sup>16</sup>*

*"Egypt Shuts Down Internet, Cellphone Service" — Wall Street Journal headline, Jan. 29, 2011*

### **On the Nature of the Net in 2014**

In 1999, legal scholar Lawrence Lessig burst onto the burgeoning Internet studies and cyberlaw scene with his accessible best-selling monograph, *Code, and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. In it, he tackled issues of content ownership, copyright and digital rights from a decidedly pro-user, open access perspective, as it related to the Internet. Even at a time when the open source movement was taking on greater importance, open source successes such as Linux were moving from a fringe hobbyists' operating system to a business-ready, enterprise system (e.g., the going public of RedHat Linux in 1999), consternation was growing among Internet users, in the wake of the rise and dramatic fall of Napster, about the legal perils and liabilities of file-sharing and other Internet use. In his text, Lessig addressed these issues head-on, arguing for greater openness and access to information as a potential source of creativity and innovation. He warned against the dangers of continued encroachment of digital rights management (DRM), media conglomeration, such as the then-recent AOL-Time Warner merger, and other moves that he saw as a threat to the free circulation of information on the Internet. Others, such as Duke University Law Professor Jamie Boyle, also got involved in the dialog, with Boyle's contribution centering on the notion of the need for expansion and protection of the digital commons, as historical allusion to and metaphor based on the closing of the physical commons of 16<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>16</sup> Originally from a TIME Magazine article, but also on his own website at <http://www.toad.com/gnu/>

England (Boyle 1996; 2003; 2008).

During that period, everyday use of the Internet by commercial entities, government agencies, students and lay users grew at massive levels, a growth characterized by the Pew Research Internet Project as facilitated by three interrelated technology sectors: access to broadband, access to mobile Internet-enabled devices and access to social media platforms.<sup>17</sup> Scholars, such as Lessig and Boyle, and Internet activists and organizations (e.g., the Electronic Frontier Foundation, or EFF) trained their focus on concerns over the potential for an increase in surveillance and control by corporate and government entities, enabled by the very same technologies that allowed Americans to get online and stay online – for work and for leisure – in unprecedented numbers.

Indeed, notions of what constitutes surveillance, and how it is undertaken on citizens, is highly bound to the technological capabilities that have evolved that afford such surveillance, pre- and post-digital. While state surveillance of its citizenry is a hardly a new phenomenon, the scope, scale and opportunities for surveillance have greatly expanded alongside this digital evolution: the rise of large-scale, high-speed digital information networks, the cheapening of mass storage, and the ease with which digital information can be efficiently and easily reproduced and aggregated all facilitated the ease of capturing and repurposing people's data for commercial and other purposes. While state surveillance of citizens has been a longstanding practice and embedded into the culture via physical architecture, the criminal justice apparatus and the rise of the criminal class and prison culture, and related institutions (Foucault 1977), a new kind of digital architecture has greatly enabled such practices to a scope and scale that was previously simply not possible, even had it been desirable. Mass, dragnet-style surveillance by

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<sup>17</sup> See "Three Technology Revolutions," <http://www.pewinternet.org/three-technology-revolutions/>



the state, or by private entities in its service, or allowing private corporate interests to gather, aggregate and, frequently, sell information gleaned via surveillance and data aggregation (of consumer behavior on websites, e.g.) is a relatively newer practice that has grown alongside the rise of the integration of Internet use in everyday life.

These technologically-enabled cultural transformations bring to the fore new questions about how much surveillance of our own behavior is acceptable, what constitutes public and private behavior, and if there even is an opportunity to opt out of surveillance practices that make us uncomfortable. Google, Facebook, and the myriad other large-scale data networks we create and enrich by our everyday behavior (through such seemingly banal practices as debit or credit purchases, banking practices, GPS geolocation in vehicles, cell phone use), when taken together, can create a startlingly accurate profile of what many would consider to be our private lives. Interestingly, the “right to privacy” is not actually one conveyed in the Constitution’s Bill of Rights (such as freedoms of speech, or assembly. It has nevertheless been codified over the years through judicial ruling and legislative statute. Our behavior online in social media, too, figures into this web of data and behavioral profiling. The subsequent information created by the tracking, retention and analysis of these behaviors is then frequently commodified and sold or used by other commercial or governmental entities, often by new types of firms such as data brokers.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps most disturbing of all, according to scholars like Marc Andrejevic (2007), much of the surveillance of the digital kind is happening with our own capitulation; lured in by the conveniences and affordances of social media, its aspects of it that are playful and experienced as leisure activities, or “playbor” (Scholz 2012), and sharing platforms, and new

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<sup>18</sup> “Are Data Brokers Targeting Your Vulnerabilities? | Q with Jian Ghomeshi | CBC Radio.” Accessed April 21, 2014. <http://www.cbc.ca/q/blog/2014/02/04/world-privacy-forum/>

social expectations that necessitate participation in large-scale information networks made up of social media front-ends, we cede our personal information, behaviors, thoughts and ideas to these platforms, to “the cloud” and, therefore, beyond anything other than an illusion of our own control.

Common throughout these processes of surveillance, control, enclosure and hidden human traces is the locus and medium they share. Once seen as a rules-free site of limitless freedom of self-expression, the Internet is, in fact, predicated on control at every level. Further, it constitutes a site of surveillance and enclosure. CCM is a heretofore-unknown critical practice that functions within these other cycles of control. CCM practices fit into this cycle in such a way as to be undetected by most, and thus help constitute an illusion of volition and participation that is not reality-based. In order to understand the implications of it in the greater digital media and Internet ecology, the current landscape of the Internet and the status quo it engenders must be fully elucidated and understood. Further, content moderation online in the broadest sense has existed in many forms since the early days of the text-based Internet, often in a voluntary and self-organized capacity and in the context of user-enforced community guidelines or norms — Julian Dibbell, for example, famously discussed such a case in his *My Tiny Life*, and scholarship on USENET from the mid-1990s covers the topic, as well (Dibbell 1998; Pfaffenberger 1996).

This chapter will elucidate several mechanisms, means and sites of control and surveillance characteristic of the commercial Internet today. I argue that CCM is yet another mechanism of control, part and parcel of the highly regulated, mediated and commercialized Internet, and works in the service of it. Like many of these protocols, it is typically hidden and unseen. For the most part users cannot significantly influence or engage with it, and typically do not know that it is even taking place. Many of the themes raised by these discussions are evident

in the next two chapters, where the results of interviews with current and former CCM workers are dissected. To fully understand the workers' insights, the context provided in this chapter serves as the backdrop to the environment in which all of the CCM workers I spoke to operate.

### **A Digital Panopticon: Surveillance and Control Online**

Since the Industrial era and into present day, surveillance practices and measures have grown alongside electronic and digital enhancements to information collection and analysis. Michel Foucault's canonical *Discipline and Punish* (1977), with special emphasis on the nineteenth-century notion of panopticism, provides both an historical basis and an ongoing metaphor for understanding the development, normalization, and processes of surveillance and control of populations. In his treatment, Foucault provides evidence for the ways in which control and power were, in the prison context, mechanized, routinized, and formulated in terms of technological and organizational processes that could be reproduced (architecturally), extended (psychologically within the prisoner's mind) and made socially acceptable, normalized and ubiquitous. The logical extent of this paradigm has been the dual development of the perpetual criminal/prison class, on the one hand, and the process of normalization of surveillance and the permanent shifting of the power relationship in favor of the watcher, on the other. In contemporary society, in particular, the latter has extended beyond the physical confines of the prison and of physical sites and architecture such that individuals are almost constantly surveilled without even being aware of it (Winokur 2008). This process is now almost always enabled by digital technology, and structures that facilitate advertising, data gathering tracking and surveillance are frequently embedded as part of the architecture of the network protocol (Galloway 2006.), technological platform (Gillespie 2010), tethered appliance (Zittrain 2008) or computer code (Lessig 2006, 38-60).

The twentieth-century, too, has offered ample evidence of technologically-enhanced governmental surveillance programs, such as the large-scale COINTELPRO used against groups considered insurgent or subversive (Saito 2002). It is best known for having frequently been used to target those who simply ideologically dissented — with a disproportionate focus on activists of color, and others whose aim was to disrupt the social status quo of Cold War, Vietnam-era America. In this way, the large-scale government surveillance programs were employed not simply to seek intelligence about potential criminal acts in order to thwart them, but to actively disrupt the potential for dissenting ideas — a dubious endeavor in a country in which freedom to hold unpopular political opinions has been enshrined in its founding Constitution. Historical precedence for government surveillance in other Western, Post-Industrial countries exists, too, such as in Great Britain’s large-scale CCTV system (Waiton 2009, 360). Its ubiquity on streets and intersections across the country put into question notions of what constitutes public space, and where and when people should expect to be monitored. Increasingly, through systems such as these and via the traces left from our electronically- enhanced, networked daily interactions, the answer is, “Anytime, anywhere, for any reason.”



**Figure 4.1:** A sign in downtown London, Ontario, warns pedestrians that video surveillance is in effect. A passerby has added his or her own commentary, by reminding us that this is the case “always.” Photo STR, London, Ontario, 2009.

The Internet, at one time considered a veritable uncharted territory of potential for free expression due to its perceived anonymity and ephemerality, has been unveiled by scholars and activists to be quite the opposite. Of course, one can always appeal to the sheer volume of activity that occurs on the Internet’s layers, networks and sites as allowing for a certain kind of ephemerality and a certain degree of anonymity — such volumes of data allowed state agencies in the past to invoke the supposed impossibility to neatly track all the activity that transpires in the packets it negotiated (Chun 2008, 6). Such a reassurance may have been fine in aggregate, but offers little to individuals who may wish for stronger protections of their personal activities. Of course, recent revelations by Wikileaks’ Julian Assange and, notably, by former NSA

contractor Edward Snowden have put lie to the claims that wide scale data harvesting programs were not in effect. In fact, they have been for some time:

If we go back in time in the early 1990s when you had the rise of the cypherpunk movement in response to state bans on cryptography, a lot of people were looking at the power of the Internet to provide free uncensored communications compared to mainstream media. But the cypherpunks always saw that, in fact, combined with this was also the power to surveil all the communications that were occurring. We now had increased communication versus increased surveillance. Increased communication means you have extra freedom relative to the people who are trying to control ideas and manufacture consent, and increased surveillance means just the opposite.

The surveillance is far more evident now than it was when bulk surveillance was just being done by the Americans, the British, the Russians and some other governments like the Swiss and the French. Now it is being done by everyone, and by nearly every state, because of the commercialization of mass surveillance. And it's totalizing now, because people put all their political ideas, their family communications, and their friendships on to the Internet. (Assange et al. 2012, 21).

Meanwhile, it is left to individuals to manage their own privacy, in the form of what data they are willing to introduce into digital platforms and social media sites, or activities they are willing to undertake online. And while it is frequently possible, from system to system, and from platform to platform in commercial software, to manage one's personal privacy settings, each comes with its own esoteric and ever-changing suite of such settings that, more often than not, default to those that favor the company's data-gathering needs. The onus is therefore on each individual to navigate and negotiate privacy settings for each relationship they enter into with

each software interaction — a daunting prospect even for those people steeped in the language of digital systems.

The result, as Vaidhyanathan (2011), Andrejevic (2007) and others have described is actually a lack of choice disguised as choice, or, as I liken it, an illusion of volition. It is unlikely, for example, that people will have the savvy or simply the memory to optimally arrange or opt out of all systems' unwanted data gathering all of the time, so one slip could constitute an irrevocable breach. Even this scenario assumes the best of cases, one under which the terms of use are relatively transparent and user-friendly and data-gathering is being done above-board and with user consent, a case that cannot always be assumed. Even these best-case scenarios represent de facto governance via nimble, frequently changing, company-controlled End-User Licensing Agreements (EULAs), Terms of Use, and contracts, rather than by whatever the typically reactive and slow-to-adapt law may or may not mandate.

Is the only option, therefore, simply not to play, as the wisdom of the mainframe computer from the 1983 film *WarGames* offered forth? Unless one can viably, reasonably live completely off the electronic grid, deal only in cash and have little contact with the mainstream world, the answer is, of course, no. In this case, we must therefore appeal to our ability as engaged citizens to effect change around egregious and ubiquitous surveillance practices, be they at the behest of the state and its demands for law and order, or due to the commodification and inherent value of the information collected about us by commercial entities. Such appeals can happen at all levels of society, from statutory interventions that protect citizens' (or more likely "consumers") rights, to a fundamental rethinking and reorganizing of the logic around the ways in which code, protocols, platforms and architectures — all human constructs and all reflections of our own social norms — are structured. As Vaidhyanathan states in his chapter on this very

topic, “. . . the only remedy is widespread political action in the public interest” (2011, 97). User ignorance and user apathy are dangerous, and portend only a proliferation of the surveillance regime status quo.

To that end, numerous policy endeavors could be developed offering other models for control over the networks, sites, data transactions, cell phone usage that many of us engage in countless times per day. Greater legal protections could be devised that would demand clear information be presented to users about what a company’s true purpose may be in operating a web site or a service, and what it does and could do with the data it gathers. In such a way, it might become more clear to most people that Google is an advertising company at least as much as it might be described as something else, and that user contributions in the form of search terms and clicks on the Google search engine, or UGC uploaded to Google-owned social media properties, actually enhance the value of Google’s product. Perhaps such information might change users’ behavior, and they might seek out alternatives; perhaps it would not. But such knowledge would certainly do much to level the field of choices from an illusion of volition to one more real. More policy items could include:

- A change in view to see the Internet and the digital backbones we increasingly rely upon to carry on the business and the social interactions of our lives as a public good and a public need, rather than as completely private. Even a hybrid public- private model would allow citizens the ability to have some control over networks and systems that they currently lack.
- The creation and sustaining of more open systems, from pipes to platforms. There are models that exist at all levels of digital systems that take an open development and public good-oriented approach. These need support, incubation, funding and adoption.
- End or greatly decrease the reach of legalized governmental data mining and surveillance under the auspices of an increased need for state security. This includes increased public scrutiny of legislation such as the USA PATRIOT Act, which has fallen out of favor in recent years.



- Demand barriers between government agencies and the almost 2000 private companies to which it farms out potentially sensitive data about citizens,<sup>19</sup> as they have no control over what those companies do, nor means to demand transparency from them. Edward Snowden was one such contract employee working in the state security apparatus who saw fit to expose the surveillance practices of the US government, and the capitulation of private corporations who provide expertise to agencies like the NSA.
- Protection, enhancement and use of FOIA, and the creation of legislation allowing for a FOIA-like provision to gain information from non-governmental corporate entities.

Finally, we must look to the wisdom of scholars like David Harvey (2010) and Dan Schiller (1999) to formulate a larger, macro-level critique of the market society under which we live that demands new surveillance to the end of the commodification of more and more information and under which every citizen is a consumer. As Vaidhyathan warns, without a deep examination of the historical roots and contemporary function of surveillance and control in relation to the current socioeconomic system, small fixes to the privacy policies of online behemoths like Amazon and Google are unlikely to effect any meaningful change for society at large (2011, 97).

### **The Digital Enclosure of “the Cloud”**

The rise of surveillance and control in the protocols and platforms that make up the Internet has gone hand-in-hand with a less tangible and more insidious process: the acculturation of users to that surveillance and enclosure as a natural means of engagement with Internet based-tools, and to their own free participation in these processes. This most frequently takes place in the form of users freely entering personal data and uploading their own user-generated content to social media platforms, but also takes place in other sites, including what has come to be known as “the cloud.” In his article, “Surveillance in the Digital Enclosure,” critical digital media scholar Mark Andrejevic takes on the task of questioning the often-idyllic and largely positive

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<sup>19</sup> According to a 2010 Washington Post special report (Arkin 2010a, 2010 b).

rhetoric frequently used to describe the variety of types of ubiquitous, always-on computing services and storage that constitute so-called cloud-based services. In so doing, he invokes the sci-fi visionary of the 1980s, William Gibson, who imagined many characteristics of the modern networked computing environment before it actually existed, and reminds us that that vision was hardly idyllic. Rather, it was a dystopian near future that Gibson portrayed, characterized by surveillance and control.

Which narrative is more realistic, in the context of the brave new world of cloud computing? Andrejevic suggests that, despite the rhetoric of convenience and untetheredness that characterizes cloud services offered by Amazon, DropBox, Microsoft and many others, the Faustian bargain into which users enter in order to gain the convenience of access to their information and the suite of applications cloud and ubiquitous computing providers offer comes at a great, yet unseen cost: the profound recentralization, consolidation and subsequent commodification and control over both the content users upload to the cloud and their concomitant habits and behaviors related to that material that can be turned into valuable data, mined, extracted and sold by cloud purveyors.

Andrejevic rejects the very metaphor, the “cloud,” upon which these services stake their appeal, preferring a more accurate turn of phrase, that of “digital enclosure,” purposely invoking the great land enclosure movements of the 17th century, when the commons gave over to private land ownership (as described earlier, a favored metaphor of Duke’s Jamie Boyle). Not just a simple semantic quibble, the difference between the two visions is actually profound; one suggests limitless potential space and the other, the very inverse, characterized by boundaries and control. The ease with which this control Andrejevic asserts is being perpetuated seems perplexing, at first. How could so many smart and tech-savvy people be so easily either misled or

rendered docile in the face of the enclosures to which they voluntarily submit?

The first answer is “through the power of seduction”: being located in the cloud provides immediacy, access, and convenience; devices interact and data are shared over them all in real time and irrespective of the constraints of physical location. The interoperability of the suite of ubiquitous computing functions across a multitude of devices and platforms, from basic wireless connectivity to specific apps and tools provided to users free of upfront charge, is alluring. Further, Andrejevic points out that the cloud-based platforms and products frequently heavily tout their primary user-directed functionalities, but mask the advertising, data gathering and information commodification that is often at the core of the revenue-generation side of their business. But even when the overt functionalities do not fully mask the behind-the-scenes data-gathering or surveillance processes, the ease-of-use and benefits of succumbing to the cloud or to the ubiquitous computing environment are highly seductive and distracting, such that most users will never question where and how the limits surrounding them are imposed. The limits are often designed to be imperceptible to users, purposely.



**Figure 4.2:** In this online advertisement for Windows7, in which cloud services were integrated, Microsoft suggested that cloud-based activity is fun, creative and social. No mention was made of any reason why one might not want to be in the cloud — or whose cloud it was. From Microsoft.com, retrieved July 2010.

The second is through the sheer and overwhelming amount of rhetoric that blindly champions the new control and commodification paradigm. Many smart people have made many bold claims about the liberating nature of computing, often focusing on the sort of in-the-weeds functions relating to mobility, access and ease of use. The rhetoric of this sort is popular, uncritical and ultimately confusing to those who seek to question the behaviors or philosophy of the data-gatherers. In the cloud, Andrejevic foresees the tracking of everything for purposes of commodification of the data generated, a regime of contracts superseding that of law, and the transformation of the notion of “freedom” taking on a new and nuanced hue; the act of doing anything freely begins to transpire within the confines of the new digital enclosures, and freedom of choice is a choice among a narrowly defined set of acts pre-selected by those in control.

In this way, the digital enclosure is a fundamental process of the accumulation and

consolidation of power and control — and with it, capital, given the new value that the gathered data takes on in a society driven by data analysis and the commodification of information for use or resale. How better to gather this data than to construct the very arenas in which it is generated, make them appealing for their overt benefits, employ a regime of complicated contracts that determine the rules of engagement while obfuscating the true value of what is being surrendered by users (e.g., their free labor or freely supplied behaviors and data), and then sit back to collect and monetize the valuable information generated and volunteered? As Andrejevic points out, once all critical services engage in the practices he critiques, “the ‘freedom’ to avoid monitoring becomes, in practice, a theoretical one” (2007, 314). The logical extent of this new surveillance culture is implicated, too, when considering the new hunger for which the government seeks information under the auspices of its “national security” mandate.

The first step in reversing this tide is to raise awareness about the ways in which commonplace digital tools actually function. There must also be new alternatives formulated, particularly as legacy pre-privatization communication systems once commonplace in universities and government environments are increasingly and rapidly disappearing; where once these entities provided in-house email and digital communication systems to staff, students, researchers and others, these are increasingly disappearing in favor of service contracts with major corporate purveyors of cloud-based tools.<sup>20</sup>

Another avenue through which pressure must be exerted is in the policy arena, where telecom and other digital giants are quite adept at creating legislation favorable to reification of their control and consolidation. A cynic might suggest that there is little hope in pursuing this

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<sup>20</sup> For example, the University of Illinois is in the process of turning its undergraduate email infrastructure over to Gmail. See <https://www.cites.illinois.edu/email/google/index.html>

avenue, at least without the component of direct and highly visible resistance on the ground. The bottom line is that the contemporary dominant iteration of the Internet as commercial space is only one vision. That it has been so successful points to the vast financial and technological resources backing the digital enclosure efforts, on the one hand, and to the selling of tools based on their convenience, accessibility, ease of use and functionality while downplaying their data-gathering and surveillance activities. Ask a person on the street, for example, what Google's primary business is, and the answer will undoubtedly be, "search engine," and not the more accurate, "advertising," or perhaps "data-mining." We must, therefore, begin to combat this problem of obfuscation by unveiling and understanding the business practices, functionality and technological underpinnings of the ubiquitous computing platforms and tools. We must identify alternate models, past and present, and offer them to users interested in maintaining greater autonomy and transparency in their networked computing environments.

While Andrejevic has typically supported the abandonment of social media and cloud-based tools until true alternatives outside of the sphere of surveillance and control can be created and implemented, some researchers have taken a different approach. They have championed a practice they have described as "sousveillance" (Mann et al. 2003). They describe this practice as being "... related to 'détournement': the tactic of appropriating tools of social controllers and resituating these tools in a disorienting manner" further noting that a practice becomes one of "... sousveillance when it is applied to individuals using tools to observe the organizational observer" (2003, 333).<sup>21</sup> Although they predate the current suite of social media and digital medial tools, Mann et al.'s concepts are perhaps even more applicable to the contemporary

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<sup>21</sup> Citing W. Ted Rogers, Detournement for Fun and (Political) Profit., *Ctheory.net*.  
<http://ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=242>, [May?] 1994.

moment, given the convergence of technologies and platforms that have eased the way for surveillance from above to take place. Sousveillance might take the form of people repurposing CCTV or law enforcement video to expose instances of police brutality, the collecting and dissemination of data regarding drone strikes in the form of a mobile app to make people aware of these military operations (the app “Metadata” does just this),<sup>22</sup> the use by protestors of consumer-grade technology (e.g., video camera-enabled cell phones; portable video Flip cams) in conjunction with social media (e.g., Twitter; YouTube) to first capture and then disseminate information about the practices of those in power. These tactics have been used to great effect in the Occupy Wall Street and subsequent Occupy events of late 2011, when police officers in New York City and then on the campus of UC-Davis were caught abusing protestors with pepper spray, and captured the attention of the country.

Yet sousveillance is not a one-stop panacea to the issues of control and surveillance that are intrinsic to the structures of the Internet and their platforms. In their discussion of sousveillance, Mann et al. note,

there is a digital divide in the unequal access to these technologies by the general public. The proliferation of environmental intelligence, in the form of cameras and microphones observing public spaces, challenges the traditional ability of an individual being able to identify and watch the watchers. The collection of data in public places, with the camera as the dominant form of data input device, is coupled with the integration of surveillance with statistical monitoring and security applications. (Mann et al. 2003, 335)

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<sup>22</sup> See <http://appadvice.com/appnn/2014/02/metadata-is-a-drone-strike-app-whether-apple-likes-it-or-not> and <http://vimeo.com/86054540>

New forms of activism and protest that employ new media and digital technologies can therefore offer one avenue of disruption to protestors, activists and resisters, which Rogers describes as the “recompil[ing of] the data self” (2008, 293). These include possibilities for the interruption, reformulating, gaming or manipulation of the surveillance of and mainstream narratives or reports about protestors and their movements, thereby having the potential to greatly affect the traditional balance of power in a very public way, but they are unlikely, on their own, to succeed in turning the tide in favor of regular people and they offer no clear means of escape for those who want to resist such participation altogether.

### **State Control and Corporate Capitulation: the Internet in Crisis**

Recent political turmoil and high-profile popular uprisings against totalitarian regimes, beginning with the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran, through the unprecedented 2010-11 events across the Arab world, and the limiting of access of entire populations to social media platforms, have put into stark relief both the import as a political organizing tool of the Internet and its various popular commercial social networking platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as the tenuous and fragile nature of social media profoundly and readily subject to surveillance, control, and manipulation by the state, who may wish to limit access to it.<sup>23</sup>

If issues of governance and control of access to the Internet were not already seen by many as beholden to the whims of sovereign governments and highly variable from one nation-state to another, former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s order to cut off all access to the Internet during the mass unrest in 2011 Egypt underscored this fact in sharp relief.<sup>24</sup> The primary channels for communication that Egyptian revolutionaries were using for both internal

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<sup>23</sup> <https://blog.twitter.com/2014/challenging-the-access-ban-in-turkey>

<sup>24</sup> “Egypt Shuts Down Internet, Cellphone Services.” *Wall Street Journal* online.  
<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703956604576110453371369740.html>



organizing as well as to continuously brief the external global audience of supporters hanging on their every Tweet were cut. Protestors scrambled for alternatives, and a worldwide chorus of popular opinion erupted in shock and anger. It was the latter phenomenon that likely prompted the Mubarak regime to reverse course days later, but not without revealing how potentially easy and devastating such sudden lack of access could be. And while the case of Egypt may have been an extreme, in the sense that a fairly liberal access had been abruptly and overtly cut for millions without warning, it brings to light the vast potential for manipulation, censorship, filtering, and other insidious practices that exist at different levels in places around the world.

Historically, legal jurisdiction had functioned in direct relationship to the geographic and political borders that have defined a particular region or state; these had been commonly understood and recognized by those subject to their laws, thus allowing for consent of the governed necessary for the enforcement of laws. The development of ICTs of various types (e.g. print media; radio) certainly may have challenged the notion of clear-cut borders, but unlikely to the extent and without as much fanfare (or threat) as the Internet did in its early transition to a major consumer, commercial and social media site of engagement.

Indeed, for many, the promise of the early Internet was that it knew no such boundaries; it seemed to transcend international borders to exist in a space that was both geographically territory-less and its own distinct territory simultaneously (“cyberspace,” as it was called). The Internet was therefore and paradoxically nowhere and everywhere, constituting a brave new borderless world and suggesting, among other things, an untapped and exciting potential to many for access to ideas and speech that, in some areas, was otherwise precluded by the state. Early cyberlibertarian/technologist John Gilmore, for example, was famously quoted as saying that the very architecture of the Internet was structurally immune (or at least highly resistant) to any

ensorship of information, accidental or otherwise, that traveled in packetized form through its interconnected nodes.<sup>25</sup> Another early Internet luminary, John Perry Barlow, famously issued a *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* that actively challenged and rejected traditional government control, legislation and jurisdiction over the Internet (Barlow 1996). It was even claimed by large Internet companies that not only was it impractical but it was, in essence, technologically infeasible to attempt to restrict access or content based on users' geographic location (and, hence, their legal jurisdiction).

Yahoo! used such a defense when it was taken to court by the French government in the late 1990s. Ultimately, it lost when it was shown that blocking based on IP address and other simple means was up to 90% effective for keeping French users off of illegal (for French people) auction sites selling Nazi memorabilia. A technological and legal precedent was set, and not long after that, Yahoo! used the very technology it claimed did not exist (and more) to enter into a business relationship with the Chinese government that would block and filter material from Chinese lay users that the state found politically subversive and otherwise objectionable (Goldsmith and Wu 2008). Any principles about freedom of access to the Internet's vast marketplace of ideas that Yahoo! may have used in its defense against the French government appeared to be set aside for the purposes of a large-scale business deal with the sovereign and free-speech-phobic Chinese government.

These anecdotes illustrate a number of important truths, neatly articulated by Miklos Haraszti in his introduction to the 2010 *Access Controlled*, about governance and control of the Internet as enacted by nation-states. "In the early days of the Web," Haraszti explains,

it was taken for granted that freedom of expression online would

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<sup>25</sup> This is discussed in Boyle 1997, 178-9, particularly 178n3.

inexorably evolve and progress. It was assumed that governments that did not uphold the fundamental human right to speak and write freely would be powerless against the spread of those values over the Internet. By now, though, those early dreams have been dashed. The reality today is that Internet censorship is a growing practice both [to the] east and west . . . [with] filtering of Internet content carried out by both established Western democracies and transitional ones. Indeed, the countries where Internet matters the most as the sole carrier of real news media are the same countries whose governments, posing as 'defenders' of the public, filter and block the most online content. No one can rely on the Internet anymore as a self-healing mechanism that can defeat censorship or blocking on its own. (Haraszi 2010, xvi)

Furthermore, where governments fail to assure fair or unfettered access to the Internet and its content and platforms, citizens have no recourse but to put their faith in the benevolence of private corporations over which they can exercise virtually no control, often with the companies in question being major transnational conglomerates who enjoy close relationships with the governments of their countries of origin. Such faith must be granted at all levels of connectivity and access, from the backbones that connect the world's networked computers, of which there are only five major ones (with those second- and third-tier backbones largely in the hands of only a few transnational media or communications conglomerates) providing access to the content that is delivered within privately held platforms.

And while Internet content, service and other kinds of providers may promise to “do no evil” (as Google's unofficial motto does) by their worldwide users, what recourse do citizens truly have to see, understand and effect change around the functions, access and behaviors of these powerful companies? Decreasing national and international regulation has been a predominating feature of the last thirty years' worldwide reorganization into a market-driven

capitalism, with unprecedented mergers and increase in corporate power to an extent previously unimagined (H. Schiller 1995). The magnitude and scale of the power of Google was on display, for example, when it acted not even as an envoy but as a virtual stand-in for the U.S. State Department in the 2009 kerfuffle with China over freedom of access and other issues (Vaidhyanathan 2011, 117-121).

In the end, whether or not Google's move to withdraw from the Chinese market was driven by its corporate motto or by its corporate profits will largely be a matter of perspective and open to interpretation. But what was clear in this situation, as in many similar ones, such as the U.S. fight over net neutrality in the face of virtually-monopolistic control over Internet access and mass media by Comcast and others, is that citizens of the world have very little control or access to effect change or governance of the Internet even in the best-case scenario of democratic governments. When few alternatives exist to corporate conglomeration and monopolistic control of backbone, ISPs, platforms and content, any arguments that ignore the overarching macro problems of media conglomeration, shrinking notions of a public sphere, and a dismantling of democratic principles and processes that were designed to create checks and balances on power are insufficiently narrow.

### **Ghosts in the Machine: On Human Traces in Digital Systems**

Likewise, a certain myopia characterizes collective engagement with social media platforms and the UGC content they solicit and disseminate. These platforms trade on a predominating origin myth of unfettered possibility for democratic free expression, on the one hand, and a newer concept of unidirectional, direct user-to-platform-to-dissemination media creation opportunities offered by "Web 2.0" and social media platforms, on the other (witness YouTube's on-again, off-again slogan, "Broadcast Yourself"). And yet, the existence of

commercial content moderation workers and the practices in which they engage certainly challenge the end-user's perceived relationship to the social media platform to which she or he is uploading content, from a simple user-to-platform to world, to one characterized by much more complex relationships, including the regimes of surveillance and control discussed earlier in this chapter. The relationships that the platforms suggest, through taglines, advertising and affordances of their tools, are therefore troubled by the existence of these unknown human agents, actors whose agendas, motivations, allegiances and mere existence are all unclear.

Once the existence of these intermediary agents becomes known, what else might be up for reevaluation? What other practices are worthy of another critical glance to identify the human values and actions embedded within them, and how does recognition of them change our understandings of them? Safiya U. Noble, for one, is asking these kinds of questions right now about Google search, and its structuring of representations of gender, sexuality and race, beginning with her own dissertation work (Noble 2012). Miriam Sweeney, too, asks questions about the nature of human intervention and embedded value systems in the creation of computerized digital assistants known as anthropomorphized virtual agents, or AVAs (Sweeney 2013). Whose values are they intended to reflect? Who do these AVAs depict, how and to what end?

Andrew Norman Wilson, too, has sought to unveil human traces in digital processes as he has revealed the work of Google Book scanners. As a one-time Google-contracted videographer, he noticed a building into which and out of which a group of workers streamed at odd hours of the day, segregated from the rest of those located on Google's sprawling Mountain View, CA, campus. After investigating further, he learned that these workers were contracted to produce the millions of page scans needed for Google's massive book digitization project — a project that, in

its final production-ready iteration, betrays no sign of these human actors involved in its creation. When Wilson probed too deeply into the lesser working conditions and status of the scanners, he was promptly fired, and Google attempted to confiscate the video he filmed of the workers, which, in homage to the early cinematic and documentary endeavors of the Lumière Brothers' 1895 "Workers Leaving the Factory," he entitled, "Workers Leaving the Googleplex."<sup>26</sup> In this way, he linked the status and work conditions of the book scanners on Google's campus directly to that of factory workers - a much less glamorous proposition than work at Google is generally depicted as being.



**Figure 4.3:** Andrew Norman Wilson's film, "Workers Leaving the Googleplex," being projected in a gallery. <http://www.andrewnormanwilson.com/WorkersGoogleplex.html>

Indeed, it is the erasure of these human traces, both literally and in a more abstract sense, that are so fascinating, and we must constantly ask to whose benefit those erasures serve. As for the Google book scanners, their human traces have been revealed, preserved and celebrated as a sort of found art, through the work of Wilson, but also through a popular Tumblr created by a Rhode

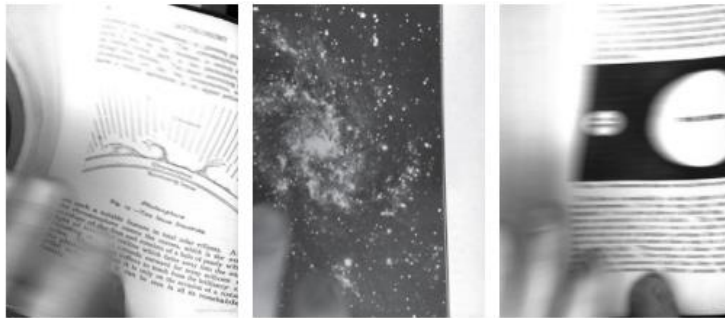
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<sup>26</sup> See Wilson's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/andandrewrew> and <http://vimeo.com/15852288>

Island School of Design MFA student (and subsequently lauded in that bastion of American highbrow culture, the *New Yorker*).<sup>27</sup>

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FEBRUARY 27, 2014



Employee's hands. Submitted by [asfaltics](#).

Throughout *The Science-History of the Universe*, v. 1, edited by Francis Rolt-Wheeler (1909). Original from the New York Public Library. Digitized June 19, 2006.

2:13PM | URL: <http://tumblr.co/ZAdOfx18h4IEG>

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**Figure 4.4:** A Google Books scanner's fingers on the Art of Google Books Tumblr, errata as art and human traces unveiled. Retrieved from: <http://theartofgooglebooks.tumblr.com> on 4/20/2014

While the site's veneration of all manner of Google Books errata, from fingers caught in the act of scanning, to notes in the margin, to scanning misfires that result in new permutations of texts, is both entertaining and thought-provoking, both Wilson's work and the Tumblr dedicated to the related images still do little to reveal more than the hint of the human trace, and the suggestion of the labor that went into producing them. Both still leave us in the dark about who made the traces and under what conditions. Nevertheless, they do serve an important function to humanize what most people undoubtedly assume is an automated process, and reveal the human in what would otherwise be considered an error.

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<sup>27</sup> Goldsmith, Kenneth. "The Artful Accidents of Google Books." *The New Yorker Blogs*, December 5, 2013. <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/12/the-art-of-google-book-scan.html>

## **Concluding Remarks**

As individuals and, on a larger scale, as societies, we are ceding unprecedented amounts of control to private companies, who see no utility or benefit to providing transparent access to their technologies, architectures, practices or finances. It becomes difficult, if not impossible, to truly know and be able to hold accountable those we engage to provide critical informational services. The full extent of their reach, their practices with the data and content we generate for them, and the people who engage with these materials are almost always unknown to and unknowable by us. By dint of this opaque inaccessibility, these digital sites of engagement – social media platforms, information systems, etc. – take on an oracle-like mysticism, becoming, as Alexander Halavais calls them, “object[s] of faith” (Halavais 2009, 2).

Yet technologies are never neutral, and therefore are not “naturally” benign or without impact. On the contrary, they are, by their nature as sociotechnical constructions, in the service of something or someone — whether as designed, or when as re-imagined or repurposed in acts of adaptation or acts of resistance. This fact therefore begs for a thorough interrogation of the questions "who benefits?" and "what are the ramifications of the deployment and adoption of these technologies in terms of the accumulation and expansion of power, acculturation, marginalization and capital?"

Yet we are ultimately responsible for envisioning the society in which we want to exist, as social media platforms, digital protocols, platforms and architecture are all human constructs, human pursuits, embedded with human choices and reflecting human values. Media scholar Lev Manovich poses this challenge: “As we work with software and use the operations embedded in it, these operations become part of how we understand ourselves, others, and the world. Strategies of working with computer data become our general cognitive strategies. At the same



time, the design of software and the human-computer interface reflects a larger social logic, ideology, and imaginary of the contemporary society. So if we find particular operations dominating software programs, we may also expect to find them at work in the culture at large” (Manovich 2001, 168)

Many scholars and activists, such as those cited and discussed in this chapter, have dedicated great amounts of intellectual labor and written words to questioning the practices and the policies that render systems opaque and that result in our information as commodities in the digital system. Less is known, though, about the human actors who labor as intermediaries in these systems. After all, activists, scholars and users can only address what they can see and know, or at least imagine, and what they can engage with.

This chapter, therefore, has been dedicated to elucidating the conditions of the contemporary commercial Internet and its characteristics — surveillance, control and enclosure — in order to set the stage for the introduction of a new type of intermediary that has, until now, been largely unknown to Internet users, activists and scholars alike. Commercial content moderators are intermediaries who negotiate an Internet defined in the terms discussed here; they manipulate and referee (frequently in secret) user-generated content in social media platforms to the end of creating spaces that are more palatable, accessible, and inviting, and that elicit more user participation. They do so for money, and they do so in terms of the goals and benefits of the companies that engage their services. While a better user experience may be an outcome of the work they do, this is always, and ultimately, because that better experience benefits the company providing the space for participation online.

With this background in mind, the reader should view the CCM workers introduced in the coming two chapters against this backdrop of an Internet that is fundamentally a site of

control, surveillance, intervention and a site of circulation of information as commodity. CCM exists at the nexus of these processes and protocols, affordances and constraints of platform, and the socio-cultural shift to acceptance of unprecedented surveillance and control over content and conduct. It is a human process, informed by human values and decisions, but, then, so, too, are all the technologically-enabled functions discussed in this chapter. After all, human-computer interaction: what other kind is there?

## Chapter 5: The Life and Times of CCM Workers Part One: Laboring in the Valley

*I can't imagine anyone who does [this] job and is able to just walk out at the end of their shift and just be done. You dwell on it, whether you want to or not. —Max Breen*

*It's factory work, almost. It's doing the same thing over and over. —Josh Santos*

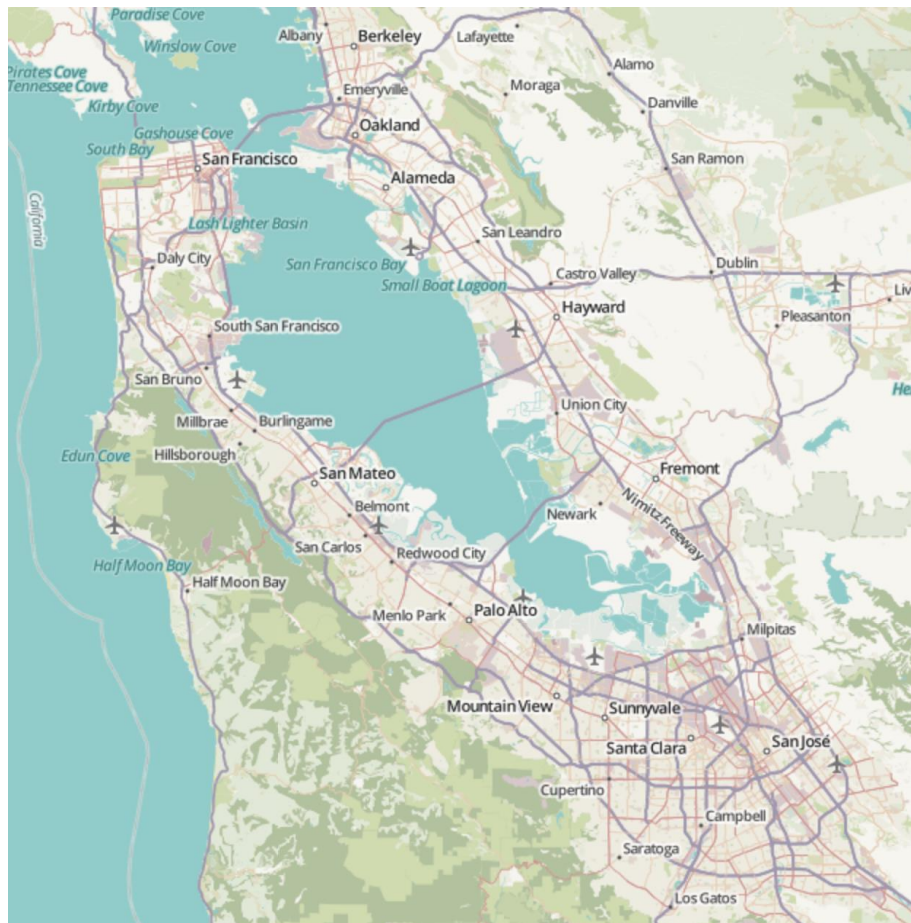
At the time of our introduction, in the fall of 2012, Max Breen<sup>28</sup> was a 24 year-old graduate of a private alternative West Coast liberal arts college, working in Silicon Valley doing CCM full-time. Although his work was covered, as is typically the case, by a non-disclosure agreement (NDA), Max was eager to talk to me and share with me his experiences and insights on his work life onsite as a contractor at MegaTech, a major Valley Internet giant, doing CCM. At the time of our interview, in the fall of 2012, Max had been off the job at MegaTech for a year and was working in another small Silicon Valley startup. At MegaTech, he and his fellow CCM workers were contractors, and each was granted a one-year term of employment, with the potential for one more year of contract renewal after a mandatory three-month break. When we talked, Max had completed his year and moved on to another job, also in the social media sector.

His colleague, Josh Santos, also 24, was finishing out his year-long contract at MegaTech, working for contracting firm TCX, and was in his last week on the MegaTech CCM team. Josh had attended UC-Berkeley and had spent the year after graduation in service jobs in Southern California before starting his job in CCM at MegaTech. Twenty-three-year-old Caitlyn Brooks, also a Cal grad (in economics), was one of the newest members of MegaTech's CCM contractor team. Only three months into her job at the time of our conversation, the position with

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<sup>28</sup> All participants, companies of employ and data have been anonymized and the names used herein for participants and firms are pseudonyms. My interventions in transcripts are indicated by "STR."

MegaTech was the first full-time employment she had ever had. I spoke to all of them over the period of one month.



**Figure 5.1:** A map depiction of the Silicon Valley, San Francisco and East Bay areas of Northern California. The CCM workers in this chapter all lived and worked in this region, commuting from San Francisco or the East Bay to their jobs at MegaTech’s Silicon Valley campus. © OpenStreetMap contributors. All OpenStreet information available under the Open Database License; see <http://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright>

Working in-house and on-site at MegaTech’s sprawling Silicon Valley corporate campus, on a small team, Max, Josh and Caitlyn spent their days (and some nights and weekends) in the relative comfort and socially upwardly-mobile environment of the iconic successful twenty-first-century tech firm. All of them had come to their CCM job with little experience in tech, and with no prior knowledge of the existence of or need for CCM.

While all CCM contractors for MegaTech were required to be college graduates,

typically from elite schools with name recognition (this requirement is a local preference of MegaTech's hiring policy), they came not from the science, technology, engineering and medicine (STEM) fields that tend to source the cubes of Silicon Valley's engineering departments, but instead brought backgrounds in a variety of liberal arts fields to their posts. To them, the chance to work in the new media economy of Northern California's tech industry was alluring and loaded with promise, and to have even obtained full-time post-graduation employment after the downturn of the larger American economy in 2008 left them feeling lucky and ahead of their peers. The CCM job seemed to offer a way up and out of the service-based economy in restaurants and food preparation, jobs that at the time were even hard to come by. But the experiences they had at MegaTech often gave them pause and occasion to reflect on the nature of their work and on the social-media-fueled economy of their environment. This chapter documents these workers' experiences - all at different trajectories in their stint as CCM contractors at MegaTech - in detail and, whenever possible, in their own complete words.

Talkative and gregarious, Max Breen connected with me one late evening over Skype. Of the three, Max had a particularly acute awareness of the value of the fundamental role and services he and his colleagues provided to their employers, both in the cases where the CCM was on behalf of the employers' own social media properties or those of the companies for whom CCM services had been contracted. He jumped eagerly into our conversation and described to me his background and how he came to join the CCM team at MegaTech.

***Max Breen:** So I wasn't actually technically contracted by MegaTech itself, I was a contractor working for this contracting company called TCX (I forget what the initials actually stand for). But they were one of three companies that hired contractors for this position at MegaTech . . . anyway they called me up and said you know, we're looking for people like you who have recently graduated and may not have a ton of work experience but have a Bachelor's degree from a good*

*university and are interested in this kind of work. It was the only job interview of any place I applied for, including being like a cash register jockey at a pizza place, so I kinda jumped on it. Had one in-person interview with some of the people at MegaTech, and that was that. It was a pretty easy hiring process.*

**Max Breen:** *They were looking for people that came from fairly rigorous schools to show they had that kind of work ethic . . . I know there were a bunch of people from Cal, there were a couple of people from Duke, so they were all kind of big name . . . a lot of them were big name or otherwise well known rigorous schools. I think that was the gist. I was a History major, there were a bunch of English majors. No real math or science people—they all got like engineering-style jobs. Mostly humanities people.*

Before he was hired by TCX, Max had never given any thought to the practice of CCM, or to the people that might do it. In his early conversations with TCX, they did not disclose complete details to him about the nature of the job and he was left to wonder:

**Max Breen:** *TCX was rather vague about what exactly I would be doing for them. They said I would be handling user reports but I wasn't sure that was going to be flag videos or copywriting, or what. During my interview and before the interview there was a written test thing, and there they were very clear that like, you are going to see disturbing content, this is not necessarily the easiest job, emotionally speaking. So I think they made it very clear before I started, during the written part of the interview, and communication between my offer and start date that it was serious material — not something that you can just kind of bullshit your way through, like, you have to be very prepared for this.*

When Josh Santos came to MegaTech as a contractor, he had a slight edge in knowledge about the position and about CCM work, in general, because his friend, Max Breen, had encouraged him to apply. But he, too, was still vague on the details. As with Max, he was attracted to the work because of the prestige of working for a firm with the reputation and name recognition that MegaTech possessed. Also like Max, Josh was a recent college grad facing a

daunting and difficult economic environment where job prospects and future opportunities were unsure.

***Josh Santos:** And I had heard about this job, and my friend Max had it earlier, like the year before. And he recommended me and said, “You won't even have to interview, you are going to get this job.” And I was like, “Oh, that sounds great!” Cause at the time it was impossible to find any type of work. So, I interviewed for it and I didn't really know what I was getting myself into. I don't mean that in a negative connotation, just mean I had no idea what the job really entailed. Well, it's MegaTech, that's going to look good on my résumé and it's going to get me out of southern Orange County, so I'll take it.*

After graduating in 2011, Caitlyn had struggled to find her place, post-college:

***Caitlyn Brooks:** Well, I'm originally from LA. And, more specifically, West Hollywood, which no one my age is from because there's no kids. And then I came up to Berkeley for school and it was pretty different. Just like the culture is really different, the weather and climate's just not as nice here. But then I made all my friends here and after I graduated I went back home for like almost a year, but I couldn't, it was just hard to find jobs there and like the types of jobs are different. I feel like my diploma wasn't worth as much down there? I don't know. It's kind of weird but it's just a lot easier to find something up here. And I couldn't, I was just bored and stuff and all my friends were just up here so I moved back to like Berkeley. And my second day back I had an interview with MegaTech and I was like, “Wow, that was really fast.” And that week I found out I got the job and I was like “Wow! Things are working out!”*

Caitlyn was using social networking for her post-college job search; non-STEM graduates from Berkeley were being targeted for the CCM job by the contracting companies hired by MegaTech to staff the CCM team. Her knowledge about the position was very limited prior to starting the job, but the allure of MegaTech was strong for her, too.

***Caitlyn Brooks:** I found out through, it was in a LinkedIn group for Cal alumni, because I went to Berkeley, and they were looking for people for the MegaTech enforcement team and I didn't really know what that meant at all. And I was like, "It sounds like the police or something." And I was like, "Yeah, it's MegaTech, sounds cool." So I just sent my résumé to the girl and they sent me a quiz to take that seems really MegaTech-like. The quiz was based on, it was like stuff you'd be doing during the job. And then I interviewed in person with a few different people and it was like, they were really cool and relaxed and they mentioned that you'd see really graphic stuff and that you'd have weird hours. But during the interview you don't really know what that means until you are actually doing the job. Which I found out later was a bigger deal. Once I was there.*

She continued, discussing her training for the job, which belied a certain youthful naiveté around the need for CCM that her more seasoned counterparts no longer shared and that she, too, had just begun to shed during her tenure at MegaTech:

***Caitlyn Brooks:** I mean, I knew it was looking at videos and stuff but even when we're doing the [job training] quiz, they asked us to look for just content that we would have to take down. But I've never been in the mindset of looking for stuff [as a MegaTech user] that obviously shouldn't be up there and I never really found that weird stuff. I usually watch music videos or something. Not like people getting executed or something. So I didn't think of all that. And just how all the stuff that's happening in other parts of the world goes to us first. Or it seems like it. Like everyone has a camera now so everyone's putting their really weird stuff and we're the ones seeing it. And I just didn't anticipate that.*

At the time we spoke, Caitlyn's overarching sentiment toward MegaTech was one of gratitude. As a non-STEM college graduate, albeit of a prestigious university, she still had little sense of what she wanted for her future and the economic situation had led her to feel that her employment options would be grim. For that reason, she was happy for her job, despite any shortcomings it may have held. Indeed, the economic stress of a poor entry-level job market was



a refrain in the interviews with all three of the young MegaTech CCM workers I spoke with, and directly dictated their actions in terms of the employment decisions they made. Caitlyn summed it up concisely:

*Caitlyn Brooks: I'm just glad to have a job. I don't really . . . can't complain because it's not like we're . . . we could be doing something so much worse. Like it's still at MegaTech, it's pretty cushy.*

### **Contractor Culture**

All three MegaTech CCM contractors expressed a desire for potentially seeking future, more permanent employment at MegaTech; indeed, it was the MegaTech name and reputation and all that it portended for the future that drew them in initially. But reality painted a different picture. The terms of their employment were thus: one year of contract labor for a third-party firm, to be undertaken at MegaTech's main campus. But they would receive an hourly wage, rather than be salaried employees, and would be barred from many of the perks of full-time employment. As part of the terms of their employment as designated by MegaTech itself, they would work for one year and, at the end of that period, would be required to either find new employment or take a mandatory three-month leave. After the three months, they would be eligible to re-up for one more contract year, but after that, employment in the CCM group would be terminated.

While the members of the CCM team I talked to hoped that such expertise, experience and knowledge of the MegaTech corporate culture and products might lead to full-time, permanent employment elsewhere within the company, Max knew of only one or two former team members for whom such a transition ever materialized. He linked this to a larger-scale culture of ostracism and pervasive under-valuing of the contractors and the CCM team, particularly.

**Max Breen:** *[The CCM contractors were] vastly under-appreciated. We made good money. Or at least absolutely for a first job out of college when most of my friends are baristas or cashiers or whatever. Good money. But you are still contractors, not a full employee. You don't get to go to the Christmas party or whatever. But actually my manager was super rad. She found enough people in the company with plus-ones that they weren't going to use to get us all in. So she went out of her way because she realized, too, that we were under-appreciated and we didn't have enough engineering support, so our tools were way out of date cause they were from years before I started. And they needed to be updated to handle new features of the site and stuff, but we didn't have the engineering bandwidth to do it. So, she understood a lot of the frustration and did her best to mitigate it. But the company itself was vastly under-appreciating. So the simplest thing they could have done to make people happier, because obviously you can't make them happier by changing the content because that isn't up to you, you have to review what you get. But make some sort of path to full-time employee. Because, oh my God, we already know all the systems, we know the policies, that should be a no-brainer. Because they were constantly expanding Copyright, Partner Managers, the Security and Policy team, whoever, they were constantly expanding. But the same external hire rules applied to us. We were not considered part of the company.*

At the time we talked, Max had been out of his MegaTech CCM experience for almost a year. As a contractor, he worked at MegaTech for an hourly wage and was unable to access some of the more storied facilities and amenities for which Valley tech companies have become notorious: climbing walls and onsite haircuts, for example. But Max and his team were also shut out from other benefits that MegaTech's full-timers received; namely, health insurance benefits. The lack of health insurance would play a larger role further on in our conversations, but it underscored Max's recognition that his team of contract CCM workers on-site at MegaTech lacked status and respect from other workers and managers who were full-time, direct employees of the behemoth

firm. It bothered Max:

**Max Breen:** *So in the time I was there, we had two people go from contractors to full-time. One was something of an anomaly because he was much older than the rest of us. He had a Master's, which none of us had, which was a giant step up, and he spoke Arabic, which was a very severe need, and, as far as I understand, was hired with a guarantee to be given a full-time position. So really there was only one guy who went from contract to full-time. That would be the single easiest thing to boost morale and help people feel more a part of the company. And that didn't happen. Even just little things that, while I understand them logically, really contributed to us not feeling welcome. So like, this is the stupidest thing in retrospect, but there was a rock-climbing wall in the lobby. Rad. We couldn't use it because we weren't on MegaTech's company insurance plan. We were individual contractors and not covered. And admittedly, logically, I understand, we're not covered. We can't do that. But, like, you pass it every day in the lobby and think, "I'm one of ten people in this company of hundreds that can't use that right there." And that's so frustrating.*

Josh Santos was frustrated, too, by MegaTech corporate culture. In particular, he resented its demands for employees to contribute intellectual labor, even the lower-status, hourly, limited-term contractors. He consciously resisted this aspect of MegaTech's workplace culture, but noted that others did not, and suspected that they hoped for a path to permanent employee status by constantly generating new ideas and projects during down time. This set him apart from his colleagues who continued to hold out hope to earn permanent employee status, by generating innovations through uncompensated, additional labor for MegaTech outside the bounds of stated work duties, which Josh found distasteful.

**Josh Santos:** . . . *They give us incentives to do other projects besides our core work, like we have the option to do projects. And a lot of admins do take our bosses up on that. "Oh, yeah, I'd love to do other projects." They're trying to kind*

*of get their foot in the door and maybe get a job afterwards. But I'm not really into that because I've seen over and over again very talented, very bright admins not get work. We've seen admins who have done just phenomenal work in projects that our higher ups would never even dream about, and they've done it and presented it and they've done it all on their own, and then at the end of their contract they're like, "Okay, bye." And after seeing that over and over, I am not going to even bother doing extra work. I'm going to do, like, what I got hired for.*

Despite his numerous frustrations with aspects of the contractor versus full-timer corporate culture at MegaTech, and the low status afforded the CCM team, Josh had no trouble delineating his reasons for going after the job in the first place. In fact, Josh, and others like him, had performed the calculus of weighing the monetary and other material perks (as well as those suggested or imagined, such as a pathway to permanent MegaTech employment, or the pedigree potential offered by having a MegaTech gig on one's résumé) for whatever damage the job might cause.

***Josh Santos:** My last job paid me three times less when I used to work as a server at a restaurant. And it was like so much more work for such little, like, just like no, almost minimum wage. And so to go from that . . . I think we're all very young. Like no one is coming from another tech job. Most other people on our team are coming straight out of school or straight after their shitty college job. This is really like for most people on the team this is their first real look at a corporate job, or a professional job. So I think a lot of people kind of stomach what they have to watch just to keep the perks of the job.*

### **Screening In, Screening Out**

At MegaTech, the CCM function that required the most human intervention — typically, the viewing and reviewing of video content that had been flagged by end-users as inappropriate — was kept almost exclusively in-house. The contractors in the CCM department were responsible for reviewing content that had already been uploaded but had been flagged by users

for review or community guidelines violations; other kinds of problematic content, such as material that violated media holders' copyright, was dealt with in an automated fashion and typically never crossed the desk of the MegaTech CCM team. What they saw, instead, was content that was flagged for review on other grounds: that it violated MegaTech's own interdiction against violent, sexually explicit, graphic gross-out or abusive content. MegaTech received hundreds of hours of uploaded video per minute, so the CCM objective at the firm was to catch-as-catch-can: to respond to user-filed complaints, and to do so quickly and efficiently, and according to internal guidelines that, once learned and employed over and over again, became rote.

MegaTech, a publicly traded multinational corporation, had uncommonly good technology and financial resources available to it; as such, the firm had both the expertise and financial means to build internal tools that responded to the specific needs of their platform and the CCM workers dealing with the volumes of UGC video content. The workers there in the CCM department used a suite of tools that had been developed for them, often with tweaks and adjustments based on their feedback.

***Max Breen:** So basically, the bulk of my work was: any time you find a video on MegaTech that you don't like or find objectionable or what-have-you, there's a little flag button at the bottom of it that will send it through a couple layers of automation [for copyright violations or through pornography-sensitive filters, e.g.] and if it's not okayed or removed by those automatic functions, it would come to us. So the way it would work, we would get the videos in batches of 10. And each video would, thank God, would auto-generate maybe 30 thumbnails. So you wouldn't have to watch the majority of the videos, just the stills. And you'd do a batch of 10, submit, and move on to the next batch. So I would do anywhere from about 1,500 to 2,000 videos a day.*

***Max Breen:** Tier 1 is speed. You want right decisions but you've got a ton of*

*videos to get through . . . so you'd get a thumbnail in each queue, some you had to watch the videos of, some you didn't. You could always watch the video. That was always an option, it wasn't just the thumbnails. But that was the main way we screened.*

*It was, we had this big list of all the queues and the number of videos awaiting review in each queue and you'd just select which you were going to work in. Which was 90% of the time Tier 1. And it would just spit you out a batch of 10 videos and it would just go full screen for the most part, that would be my whole main monitor. Then I would have stuff on the side. Twitter, a video, whatever. And it would just be one video per screen, and when you were done with that and you'd made your decision you would, it would just flip to the next video. And once you did 10 you submitted the batch and it would pull you another batch out of the queue.*

*There were hot keys, but the hot keys were essentially activated a pull down menu. So like by the end I think it took me a second, 2 seconds, 3 seconds of video. I just knew all the hot keys so well, it's like touch typing by that point.*

A year after Max's departure from the CCM team, Josh Santos described how the process at MegaTech had evolved, to now include a team of contractors based in India handling some of the most clear-cut cases of policy violations:

**Josh Santos:** *Our tools are very straightforward. I mean we have what's called a queue, and whenever anything is flagged it goes into this queue. Depending on the flag, it gets separated into different things. So if they flag it for pornography it gets sent to our team in India—they handle the pornography mostly. But anything else, like hate speech or violent something like that, will get sent to us. And then we basically get it in batches, and then we basically, there's no rhyme or reason to it, it's just you might get a violence video followed by three hate speech videos followed by a harassment video followed by two more violence. And then we have a series of hot keys that correspond to our policies. So essentially the way it works out is you get a video, and it's separated into stills, into little thumbs. We get 40*

*little thumbnails, that way we don't have to watch the video we can instantly see "oh, well there's some genitals" or "there's a man's head but he's not connected to it". . . something like that. And we can instantly apply policy. So it's extremely streamlined.*

**Josh Santos:** *I mean, there isn't really much to the job description other than you moderate the stuff that's flagged. If it violates our policies we take it down. Otherwise we keep it up. And then like everyone tells you it's going to be like a lot of violence, and you're going to see a lot of heinous, just the dearth of humanity, like, just all day. And that's not a far cry from the truth. That is what you see all day. Violence and pornography. And it takes a certain level of apathy to kind of deal with it, I would say.*

Caitlyn verified the description of the daily work expectations in her comments:

**Caitlyn Brooks:** *I carpool in the morning and get there at like 8:30 and we have breakfast. And then basically the whole day we're just supposed to do one task and that's looking at the queue and all the videos and just making sure that, we have to keep the queue down to like under an hour. Videos have to be flagged. Like, we're just trying to, how do I say this? We try to make it so that the videos have been looked at within like an hour of being flagged, by us. So, our little dashboard thing, and we just look at tons of videos. They're not filtered into different categories, just like maybe by languages. But then that's basically it. So we see a lot of violent stuff, porn, and sexual stuff like that . . . harassment, and hate. Like everything that's been flagged goes in the same place, and spam too. So we just look at that throughout the day. And then we take breaks. Because it might be too much or we have lunch, and then we keep doing that.*

So if microlabor websites such as oDesk and Mechanical Turk supply work in a form most resembling digital piecework, then in-house and call center and other similar CCM screening jobs represent the work of the new digital assembly line: rote, repetitive, quota-driven, queue-based, automated tasks relying on mechanization and rational management practices and

serving up metrics to assess employee productivity and efficiency. Rather than the creative, self-expressive work that has typically characterized the best depictions of the tech industry, and that subset based around social media, in particular, the environment and work tasks at MegaTech's CCM team resembled something much more classical in arrangement: the digital factory. Indeed, Josh directly invoked the specter of the factory and factory work as analogy when describing the conditions and expectations of his CCM job, saying:

*Josh Santos: It's factory work, almost. It's doing the same thing over and over.*

### **Who Decides? Internal Policy Development and Application at MegaTech**

The CCM team operated under a regime of internal policies developed by a group of full-time employees to whom the CCMers reported: the Security & Policy, or SecPol, Group. These internal policies by which the CCM workers adjudicated content were not available to the public, but, rather, were treated as trade secrets, and ultimately functioned in the service of brand management for MegaTech. In part, this was done due to the potential of unscrupulous users to game the policies and work very close to the line or just far enough over it to keep questionable content up. But revealing these policies would also compromise the secrecy around the nature of the work of the CCM contractors. The kind of content that causes the moderation process to be enacted would be made known by such a publicizing of internal policy, thereby bringing to light a very ugly reality and underside of a platform whose public image is one of providing entertainment, fun and access to broadcasting, from user to platform, and platform to the world.

Further, as the workers themselves point out, while MegaTech is a corporation whose very name is ubiquitous with the Internet itself and, as such, has a global reach and userbase, its policies are developed in the specific and rarefied sociocultural context of educated, upwardly mobile Silicon Valley, USA. The internal policies often reflected the needs of the company for



brand protection first, and, symbiotically, as a mechanism for the enactment of the company's American approach to liberal interpretations of concepts such as free speech and information access. Social mores, too, were refracted through a decidedly American and Western cultural lens. The workers therefore served as proxies and conduits for all of these complex sets of values and cultural systems as they undertook their CCM tasks, even when internal policies clashed with the employee's own value set.

***Josh Santos:** We try to keep a global viewpoint when applying our policies. At least that's what they say. I feel like they really are grounded in American values, because things like nudity, and I mean just like topless nudity, that's fine in many European nations or like anywhere they're fine with topless nudity except like the Middle East and Japan, but here we take those down.*

***Max Breen:** We have very very specific itemized internally policies . . . The internal policies are not made public because then it becomes very easy to skirt them to essentially the point of breaking them. So yeah, we had very specific internal policies that we were constantly, we would meet once a week with SecPol to discuss, there was one, blackface is not technically considered hate speech by default. Which always rubbed me the wrong way, so I had probably ten meltdowns about that. When we were having these meetings discussing policy and, to be fair to them, they always listened to me, they never shut me up. They didn't agree, and they never changed the policy but they always let me have my say, which was surprising. So yeah, we had dozens of pages of the internal policy that we would apply to the videos.*

***STR:** Right. So what a user sees is pretty nebulous language, right?*

***Max Breen:** Basically it gives us wiggle room.*

At MegaTech, the internal policies on removing content responded to and reflected a number of other things: publicized community guidelines available to all users; content owners' wishes for a takedown of content posted without consent, etc.

**Josh Santos:** *Policies are really about the social climate. So if something becomes acceptable socially, then we'll change our policies, but otherwise policies respond to the global social climate. Like, we have, basically our policies are meant to protect certain groups.*

Indeed, some groups were treated differently at MegaTech, despite the existence of policies and protocols, because of the nature of their contributions to MegaTech's success. This typically meant a big "partner," a UGC producer whose material drove users in large quantities to MegaTech, thereby earning advertising dollars for themselves and for the site. Max described the relationship.

**STR:** *Big-name partners would be . . . ?*

**Max Breen:** *Any of the users you see on MegaTech that have ads on their videos. If you are a good enough user you can enroll in the partner program and that gives you a cut of that ad revenue. So we would, the partners could write directly to SecPol and Legal Support and sometimes we would get a video that was, say, a partner that would normally warrant a strike on their account and removal of the video . . . it was a three strikes and you're banned. But maybe they're a big deal partner and we don't want to ban them so we would send it to SecPol and they would talk to them.*

**Max Breen:** *I should be clear – they would not leave the partner's videos up. They would tell them to take it down and they would be a little more specific than our policy page would be about what the specific violation was, but we didn't, as far as I know, we never broke the rules for partners, we might bend them a tiny bit, but there was never any out and out leaving something objectionable up.*

Some types of content and behaviors that straddled lines of acceptability were a constant source of CCM work at MegaTech. Max described one particular type that got under his skin:

**Max Breen:** *So there was a big problem and I would be almost certain it's still a problem, with dare videos. Where it would mostly be early teen girls, sometimes*

*teen boys but not that often, would have MegaTech accounts without their parents knowing, saying “we're bored, give us dares.” And creepos would find them and say “show us your feet.” Or things that are sexual but the kids don't understand that they're sexual. And it was really creepy. And this guy, that's what he did, he found those and flagged them for us and we took them down. It was awesome. I mean, I try not to think about the fact that he might have been into that and that's how he could cover his base if someone ever came asking about why do you watch all these videos. But the fact is we took down thousands and thousands of those videos off that guy's flags.*

For Josh, his status as a contractor for MegaTech and not a full-time MegaTech employee had ramifications where internal policy development was concerned. While full-time employees from the higher-status SecPol team and other full-time employees involved in CCM functions frequently suggested to the contract CCM workers that their input was valued, Josh felt that it was simply lip service. Despite the fact that he was an expert in both the kind of objectionable content seen in the queues, and in MegaTech's own internal policy, he was frustrated by a sense of powerlessness to effect real change. Their status as temporary employees played directly into this situation.

***Josh Santos:** But I don't feel that the contracted team, my team that is there for just a year, versus the team that is there full-time, like they constantly tell us “you guys have just as much say in how our policy is shaped as we do.” And that's of course, not true at all . . . I mean, we do communicate about the policy but we don't really have any kind of power over changing it.*

### **Global Diplomacy, Social Media Style: CCM's Invisible Foreign Policy Function**

Often, videos that otherwise would have been clear cases for keeping or for removal became catalysts for arduous decision processes or heated debates among the CCM team and between CCM and SecPol, where decisions would be made not on the content of the videos but

because of their value or merit as political commentary or advocacy. The videos uploaded to MegaTech from war-torn parts of the globe were some of the most difficult that the CCM team had to deal with, and all three of the participants cited this content as material that stayed with them after the workday was over.

The decisions made to keep this type of content up or to remove it had a major impact, as MegaTech is a major outlet for people attempting to draw attention to political crises, conflicts and war crimes, and so decisions related to it were treated seriously and somberly by the CCM and SecPol Teams. In this way, MegaTech's policy decisions around which war zone footage was suitable for hosting and dissemination and which was not — and, in fact, what the definition of a legitimate “war” might be - took on a highly important role, often beyond what the CCM team realized. The directives were coming from the SecPol team, the full-time MegaTech employees, and, possibly, from even higher than that. Internal policy governing the terms of access to user-generated content also reflected and was affected by the fickle and dynamic currents of world events and political allegiances. This dimension of policy, too, was frequently easily identifiable as being developed through the lens of a classical liberal United States-centric perspective. It could very easily become a situation, therefore, of either tacitly or overtly supporting US foreign policy by choosing which content would be displayed and which would be pulled down.

***Max Breen:** When I was there the Arab Spring stuff was happening, and a lot of that content was really gory. But then, that was the only place activists in those countries could upload it, so we let it go with a warning. Like, you had to say “I'm over 18” to see this video. So for instance, if you have . . . the monk who self-immolated in Vietnam. So if it was documentary footage of that, even though it was disturbing, that would probably be fine. If it was inflammatory or taken out of context, then obviously someone committing suicide is not going to be acceptable*

*or . . . like, Columbine is something that shows up on MegaTech a lot. If it is documentary footage it is fine, but there is a lot of mass shooter glorification stuff that happens there, and that's obviously not okay.*

**Josh Santos:** *There are things that regardless of the level of like how much you can stomach, there are things we see in a day that can completely catch you off guard. Especially things like the war in Syria right now, I mean, you never know what's going to come up. There was a day when there was a bomb in a school and it killed like 20-some kids, and the video was devastating. There were just pieces of children everywhere. It was very raw. And because it was we were trying to help by keeping things about their plight up, like we kept all that up. Just seeing that. And these videos become viral for that reason. Because they are very violent and they are very relevant and topical. So we've constantly seen this footage. So that takes it out of you a little bit.*

Josh, in particular, questioned the policy that permitted some conflicts' content being allowed to stand, for informational and advocacy purposes, while other material was removed. Here, too, the power differential between the contract CCM workers, employed for a finite period and limited in their ability to craft or enact policy, and that of the SecPol team, full-timers who developed policy but were removed from the day-to-day realities of screening the UGC, also came to a head once again.

**Josh Santos:** *One of the people on SecPol is very passionate about any kind of crisis in the Middle East, which is a fine position. But the thing is because we have such a sensitive approach to how we tackle videos in the Middle East, it doesn't translate to other nations. Which me and another admin got really upset about that. For example the drug war that is going on in Mexico—a lot of the people who are on both sides were uploading videos of the war. Murders or hostages and interrogations. Stuff that we keep up for the war that is going on in Syria. The exact same content. I mean, it's for a different reason, but the content is the same. There are two sides, for all purposes it's the same content. But the*

*argument they gave me was that it wasn't newsworthy enough. The drug war. And they also gave, there was also a recent, a coup or something in Russia, a civil war or something in a really small, isolated area. And the violence out of there, they also said it wasn't newsworthy. So it just feels like there is a double standard, and my understanding is the sole purpose is that one person on the SecPol team is just passionate about the issues in the Middle East.*

Caitlyn also struggled with the content from Syria, although she disavowed any longer-term effects from viewing the video:

**Caitlyn Brooks:** *Most of the stuff that I've seen is just redundant and I'm just like "Okay. I know what that is. I'm over it." But there's always some really weird stuff that come out that you've never seen. Or just a lot of the, all the really graphic images from Syria, those are still pretty bad. But they're fleeting. It's only like a few seconds.*

Although she was tasked with making decisions about keeping war zone content up and accessible to millions of people or removing it, Caitlyn appeared to have little knowledge about the nature of the conflicts she was seeing and reviewing:

**STR:** *So has this job brought more exposure to you of stuff going on around the world that you maybe didn't know about before?*

**Caitlyn Brooks:** *Yeah, it's more like though, I'd have to really like read up on the stuff outside [of work] because we see all the original content but I still don't really understand what's happening and I'd have to, like, make an effort. And all that just seems so complicated that even if I tried I'd still be pretty confused.*

Caitlyn, like Josh, did see a disconnect between the internal policies involving some of the content decisions around this type of material, but confessed to not having enough information to understand or evaluate the rationale behind them. Instead, she complied with the internal policies as dictated to her.

**Caitlyn Brooks:** *Well, most of [the war zone footage], we have to keep most of it up, actually like all of it. Because we're seen as, like, their way to show what's happening there. Even though if it was happening in other countries, like in Mexico with all the drug war stuff? That stuff we would have to take down, cause I guess, like, I don't know the reasoning for that. But in Syria it's just like we're giving them this voice. So we can, we age restrict a lot of the really graphic stuff. But some of the stuff where's there's just a dead body but they're not bleeding or something—anyone can see it. But also the people who search for it are from the area and it's in Arabic so I don't know how many people, if they're a lot of Arabic people in the US or kids that are searching for it, so they're not going to come across it. Which makes me feel better about keeping it up.*

Meanwhile, the brand management and protection function was often at the center of the decision to remove political content, too — often on the orders of SecPol or other upper-management teams. Brand management in these cases served to not only insulate MegaTech itself from criticism, but also to protect its partners and high-volume users from negative publicity, too. In our interview, Josh referred to this aspect of CCM as a “PR,” or “public relations” concern.

**Josh Santos:** *. . . the policy is so slow to change [the SecPol team members] don't really have much work to do. So they are constantly like, they just have a bunch of semantic arguments every day. And they just kind of, they're not really changing much. They are clearly working on something, but nothing much changes because of them. Only when there is a clear policy issue or a legal issue, for example before our foreign terror organization policy we would just allow Al-Qaeda to have their videos up. And then as soon as an article comes out, I think in the New York Times, “Oh, MegaTech is working with Al-Qaeda” or “MegaTech is allowing Al-Qaeda to upload their videos.” That instantly becomes a PR issue and then our policy team says, “Okay, we have to make a policy about this.” But basically, unless there is a pertinent PR or legal issue our policy does not change. That team is there to protect MegaTech so we'll allow anything to be up unless it is becoming a PR or a legal issue.*

At MegaTech, issues of public relations and brand management were conflated with, influenced by and influenced issues of democratic expression and political advocacy, yet most users attempting to harness the power of the latter had no real grasp of the ramifications of the decision-making process to host their content, as seen through the lens of the former. Yet because of its massive popularity, ubiquity and ease of use, MegaTech continues to be a site on which people from around the world upload graphic material to the end of achieving support or advocacy for a political faction or group in war or conflict. With a lack of any other real space for such material that also has the ubiquity and ease of the MegaTech platform, and with governments and others constantly treating access to the Internet as a vital part of controlling conflict, MegaTech will undoubtedly continue to have an outsized role in effecting influence in these arenas.

It is a complicated and fraught relationship, and although MegaTech's internal policies seem to favor people in crisis seeking an outlet to bring world support and outrage to their plights, it must be underscored that MegaTech's allegiances ultimately lie elsewhere. Even when they do lie with people seeking support and advocacy, as in the case with the SecPol employee, Josh and Caitlyn both were struck by the unequal application of policies to material that, content-wise, was very similar. When a commercial, profit-driven platform like MegaTech stands in for democratic access to information dissemination, such confusions over allegiances and goals will necessarily feud with drives to maintain positive corporate relations with shareholders and governments. Yet, in a time of digital enclosure and vast commercialization of zones of expression, where such zones exist at all, it is not clear what other options people might have to voice dissent.



## **Online Crime-Stoppers: The MegaTech Underbelly and CCM's Engagement with Law Enforcement**

While I never directly asked any of the CCM team members about the very worst of the content they had come across in their tenure at MegaTech, such conversations invariably surfaced. In each case, the workers identified their difficulty with seeing graphic depictions of sexual abuse involving children, cases of self-harm threats, and footage from war zones as the most traumatic that they dealt with. In the cases of witnessing crimes, the CCM team had specific protocols for engaging with law enforcement and other partners to provide information on the content creators and uploaders, and, when possible, those in harm's way. Max discussed the way this protocol functioned and his experiences dealing with it as he advanced in his position to tackling more challenging CCM cases.

***Max Breen:** There were specific queues for various languages, for instance, that you would escalate out of Tier 1. So like if there was one all in Hungarian and you couldn't tell what was going on, you could send it to the Hungarian queue. There was a dedicated spam queue. There was Tier 2 which was anytime one of the admins were not sure what the call was or something that maybe should be left up but violated some policy — one that we would use to discuss whether that policy was broken or not. There was the child porn queue, which anything from Tier 1 that needed to be reported to NECMEC would get funneled into. And a couple others. So once you started doing those, your quantity of videos started going down, but I would reliably do about 1500 to 2000 a day.*

***Max Breen:** NECMEC is the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. We had a direct connection with them . . . we were able to just hit a hot key and it would forward the video and all the data and information associated with that video straight to NECMEC. Oh, and if anything was a suicide threat or something that required immediate attention or in some cases was what would become news a couple hours later, we would send that to the team above ours . . .*

*So [SecPol], they wrote all the policy, although they took input from us, they reached out to law enforcement or the big name partners or things like that.*

**STR:** *Did you, when you were doing the work, did you feel like you had a duty or sense of responsibility in what you were doing in terms of mitigating the “damage” to others?*

**Max Breen:** *Absolutely that was one of the things that helped you not just quit immediately. Especially for the child porn and child abuse material. Because most of the time it would be re-uploads, unfortunately. So stuff that was already known to NECMEC and the FBI. But every once and awhile you'd get someone that was dumb enough to upload new first-hand content. And it was horrible to have to see, and those were always the worst days, but at the same time you knew that you had a direct line to law enforcement that could handle that. And one of the things that helped the most actually, with dealing with that kind of content, is we had a video conference with a guy from INTERPOL who handled that kind of stuff in Europe . . . And they were showing how they found within a day a kid that was uploaded to Photobucket [an online social media image-sharing site] or something. And it's this totally average looking 10 year-old kid sitting in a totally average 10 year-old kid's bedroom. There's nothing, no written text that would indicate country, no data that would tell when it was taken, anything, and the researchers found, poking out from under the bed, a bag with a company logo on it that only was a regional grocery store in northeastern France. And from that they were able to find this kid and get him out of there in like a day or two. And we never got any feedback, and that's another thing I said in my exit interview, anytime someone sends a report in, be it a suicide threat or child abuse or something that there is a tangible benefit from, oh my God: tell them. It will make their lives so much better. But even knowing that that kind of thing was feasible from this content that was virtually anonymous, just knowing that that could happen really helped you deal with it.*

During his tenure with the CCM team, Josh also had had occasion to encounter situations that mandated the involvement of law enforcement. In his case, these experiences were based on

video content expressing suicidal threats and ideation. His ability to streamline the system to evoke a potentially life-saving intervention was one of his points of pride.

*Josh Santos: . . . Our team has been very proactive when it comes to people leaving suicidal messages. And basically the process to escalate any suicidal message to the authorities is really cumbersome. So I basically inserted a much quicker system. A lot more admins actually took the time to escalate any of the suicidal videos. So that helped, I mean, it's a very low number, but any prevention helps. Like I think we prevented nine suicides. According to the authorities. Out of like 800 suicidal videos. But whatever, nine people. So . . .*

At that point, Josh paused, and completed his thought, expressing some of the most profound insight he had displayed in our lengthy interview. Josh implicated the very existence of MegaTech, and its nature as a magnet for disturbing content, for bullying activity and to give a platform to people with disturbed mental states, as a potential cause to lead someone to depression and suicidal thoughts. Josh, in effect, implicated himself, his colleagues, MegaTech's corporate environment and, most importantly, all of us who use MegaTech and platforms similar to it.

*Josh Santos: I mean we get feedback only when the outcome is positive. That's the other thing I'm wondering about. We'll get feedback when the authorities say, "Oh, congratulations, we helped this person that uploaded this [suicide threat] video and they are getting treatment now." But I have always been curious . . . what about the people you don't report back on? Are they okay? What about people who haven't been flagged yet, people who put a suicide video up and no one flagged, cause we're not seeing those? And then, to me it's a little frustrating that every time, it's good that our team is proactive when it comes to people leaving up suicidal messages but at the same time, we are MegaTech. Which is probably a catalyst for making a lot of people want to commit suicide. So that's something they are not bringing up. Yeah this person feels like they are bullied,*

*but they also feel like they are bullied because of our website. Like because we're not really tackling these [abusive] commenters [on MegaTech]. I don't know. But that's something that people keep hush-hush. They don't really want to think about that side of it.*

He continued, his cynicism and frustration clear in his delivery:

**Josh Santos:** *I would say personally one of my pet peeves is when people are on a high horse and people are kind of congratulating themselves all the time because I'm like, yeah, it's good to be proud of yourself but at the same time, step back a little bit. But at MegaTech that sentiment is so widespread. Everyone is so proud of themselves at MegaTech. Everyone is just smelling their own farts. So when someone is like "We prevented a suicide!" and everyone is just "Good job guys!" I agree, good job guys, but it's like let's take a step back and think about why this happened in the first place.*

#### **“You Dwell on It”: On Job Stress, Isolation and Impacts**

The workers self-segregated from friends and family and didn't want to talk to others about their work; doing so would have burdened others. The long-term impacts are totally unknown for workers in this field. In future research, we will have to follow them longitudinally to actually assess this impact.

**Max Breen:** *Everyone [on the CCM team] was very talkative and being talkative helped you, not necessarily deal with the content, we didn't really talk too much about the problematic stuff, but it helped distract you . . . MySpace, when they had content moderators they were in these shitty little cubicles in Florida and they were paid minimum wage and they would go in, eight hours without talking to someone, and be gone. I couldn't do it. Without being able to talk to other people all day long and be able to distract yourself from this, couldn't do it. It's awful. But I got along very well with all the people on my team and I'm still friendly with a great deal of them, and it was a good support structure even if we didn't actually talk about the videos themselves for the most part. And then, I handle*

*stress ok. I thought I handled it better than I did once I got the job. But once I was a couple months into the job, even though the content was mostly the same, it's the accumulation. It weighs on you. But I handle stress pretty well, I never let it impact me at work. I gained a lot of weight because I was snacking a bunch and probably drinking a lot more than I am now, but it never got to me too bad. Except in the time around the Arab Spring stuff. Cause there was just so much gore coming out of there. That hit me pretty hard. But for the most part, the team was what really helped me deal with it the most. I wouldn't have been able to do it with a less talkative friendly team.*

Despite Max's claims that the job took very little emotional or physical toll on him, he contradicted this assertion by noting his weight gain and increased alcoholic beverage consumption, as well as struggling with particular kinds of content. This revelatory moment in the interview was important, and it happened over and over again with all three MegaTech contractors. The workers assured and reassured me verbally that they were not particularly negatively affected by their work, and then would demonstrate, via anecdotes or other examples of difficult moments, that the work, in fact, was entering into their psyche and interpersonal relationships outside of the bounds of their shifts.

This lack of self-awareness was curious; what was to be gained by insisting that one was unaffected by content that would likely cause most people difficulty? Of course, a main criterion of success for being good at this job was the ability to handle and manage the content. Admitting otherwise was, effectively, admitting to not having the skills to manage and master the CCM job. Josh and Caitlyn, too, talked around the psychological and other impacts on themselves throughout our interviews. At various points, Josh described his attitude as one of "apathy" toward the disturbing content to which he was regularly exposed. And yet, just as in Max's case, it was clear that his CCM tasks did weigh upon him, at least from time to time, as they did on Caitlyn.

*Josh Santos: For me, something that will really get to me, during a violent video is, like, noises. So if I have to hear someone screaming or if I have to hear someone crying during something violent, that gets me more than the on-camera blood or gore. So the fact that I don't have to listen to it, I can just look at pictures of it [as thumbnails], that makes it a lot easier. The moderator's iron constitution. I don't know, my job isn't difficult. It's just how much you can take in, how much you can handle. How much violence. And I mean even the violence isn't difficult. The violence and the porn don't get to me. It's just the things that people, like the hate speech and the conspiracies.*

*Caitlyn Brooks: A lot of the stuff hasn't been an issue for me, like a lot of the graphic like violent content hasn't been as serious as for other people. Cause for me it's like fleeting. I don't watch the videos. I can tell what's happening and I see it for a second. But then there have been some moments when I saw something really disturbing and I just have to take a break and like talk to someone on the team and be like "this is really gross, I need to go back to normal life and just . . . you know, refresh."*

For Josh and Caitlyn, in particular, at just three months on her job, the reluctance to overtly address the results of the content viewing could have been a coping mechanism. Max, at a year removed from his experiences, had had more time to reflect, as well as to weigh the impacts of his CCM job on other aspects of his life, in a way that Josh and Caitlyn perhaps had not been able to yet allow themselves to do. This aspect of the long-term implications of CCM on its workers must therefore be followed and studied into the future, after the workers have left their positions and moved on in their lives.

During Max's time at MegaTech, camaraderie and solidarity among the contractors on the CCM team was a key to his ability to complete his work tasks. Yet, by the time of Josh's tenure, this environment within the group had changed significantly and for the worse. Josh attributed this to a great deal of turnover, as mandated by the year-long contracts, and low

morale, brought on, in part, by the knowledge that the emotionally tough CCM job was likely to end in termination, rather than in an elevation of status or promotion internally as a MegaTech full-timer, and the internal competition that this engendered on the team. This mattered, because a cohesive team environment had been a primary outlet for handling the difficult parts of the job. Without it, CCM team members were without an important coping mechanism for the worst aspects of their tasks.

***Max Breen:** I can't imagine anyone who does [this] job and is able to just walk out at the end of their shift and just be done. You dwell on it, whether you want to or not. So that was something we were all conscious of and like I said, we never talked about it directly but it definitely was a feature in the conversation subconsciously. So we'd chat after work or we'd go get a pub quiz, stay after work and play board games sometimes. It was just we all got along really well and there was a sense of bonding because we were all dealing with the same thing.*

Just a year later, and the climate had dramatically declined:

***Josh Santos:** When I started there was a lot more camaraderie. There was more of a sentiment that we are all in this together. That kind of dissipated after certain people left and it never really recovered. So right now, I mean, there are . . . it's more cliquy I would say. Certain people kind of get along with others, but the team, as a whole, doesn't resonate. You can kind of tell during lunch hour. Before we would all go get lunch and no one would really speak to each other. And now we don't even get lunch together. Like two people will go get lunch and then two other people will go. So our team has . . . it's a very sad place because you really are trying to . . . and it's just because people are taking things personally . . . But really I think that the prime reason that we are the way we are is just because of the competitiveness. If there was a very clear understanding from the get -go that you will most likely not be working here after your contract or if there was more opportunity for employment after your contract it would be a different story. But I feel that because everyone wants to get that, we call it red badges and white*

*badges — so the red badges are the contractors and the white badge is the sought after badge . . . everyone wants that white badge. So I don't know. I feel like, as you can tell I gave up on the concept of getting a job of MegaTech. At least immediately following the contract. But a lot of people hang on to it and disregard their co-workers for the sake of their own professional advancement. So long story short, the team environment could be better. It could be more.*

### **“In the Hole of Filth”: The Effects of the Content on the CCM Workers and the People in Their Lives**

As with almost all the CCM workers I spoke with, from a variety of sectors, the MegaTech CCM team was particularly concerned with the potential for burdening others (such as friends and family members) if they were to tell them of their workplace experiences. Instead of sharing their experiences and their emotional responses to difficult content, the workers turned inward, either focusing such discussions among each other only, or not discussing them in a serious way at all.

***STR:** Did you talk about any of those experiences with anyone else in your life outside of work?*

***Max Breen:** About dealing with the videos?*

***STR:** About what you were seeing.*

***Max Breen:** Mostly in a joking manner. I would tell them about the funny things I saw or maybe the serious things I saw but that were newsworthy or relevant. I'd try not to talk about stuff that no one ever wants to see, ever. And no one should have to even hear about. So I tried not to discuss that with anyone. And I should have. Because that's really something . . . I wouldn't ever want to lay more stuff on my coworkers that were also dealing with that, but I should have had someone I could talk to about it. Like my girlfriend told me, who I live with and lived with at the time, you know, I would come home after a bad day and have a bunch of beer or something and she would say, “Oh, you should talk about it.” And I knew*



*that I should but at the same time I didn't want to burden someone else with it. Which is I think how everyone on the team felt.*

**Josh Santos:** *People are very interested in what you do when you tell someone you work at MegaTech. They are like “what do you do at MegaTech?” “Oh, I moderate all the heinous content, the porn, and all the . . . ” And people find that funny or interesting, so you just give them a cute little summary. Like, “Yeah, I see porn all day,” or “yeah, I see bloody gore all day.” And they are like, “Oh, that's disappointing.” But I don't really go into the nitty-gritty . . . They're really just interested in the content, what you're watching. So that's pretty much what I limit it to. Or I tell them just about the perks of the job. You get so . . . You don't really want to talk about it. You kind of feel like you spent eight hours just in this hole of filth that you don't really want to bring it into the rest of your life. Even when I'm with my coworkers we don't talk about anything work related. We just kind of keep it . . . it's not so much that it's traumatizing. It's just that, I don't know, you don't want to pass your burden on other people's shoulders.*

And Caitlyn, too, kept her concerns and viewing related difficulties within the CCM team, for similar reasons, in spite of her claims that she was largely unaffected by her work.

**Caitlyn Brooks:** *“ . . . I've really liked the people I've met. They make it a lot better and easier to do. Cause you just can't talk to your friends about this because they're not there. They'd be like, “What? That's weird.” When you're with people that know what you're going through it makes it a lot better.*

Despite the lack of comprehensive health insurance for the CCM contractors, MegaTech had made some tacit attempts to address the potential of psychological stress and difficulty handling content on the workers. Yet that attempt had mostly failed.

**Max Breen:** *And I know now they have counselors come in. I'm not sure at what intervals or how effective it is, but you can ask Josh about that. When I was hired they said we were supposed to have some kind of access to counseling as part of the contract. Because we didn't have insurance, that was not part of the contract,*

*but it was supposed to be provided. But I was never told how to access it and as far as I know no one ever did. My last month there they started doing, they had a counselor come in once, but it was two weeks before I left so I don't know what ever came of it. It was a group session, I don't know if they did or do individual sessions. But I would, in my exit interview I told my manager, and I would advocate this to any company that has to deal with this kind of content, you need, you don't need to offer that to the people, you need to force them to do it. Because I would imagine other people in other companies doing this have the mindset that me and my teammates did – that, even a professional, you don't want to burden them with all the horrible stuff you have to look at all day long. Because they may be helping you deal with it, but then they have to deal with that too. And even second hand it's damaging. But at one point, after the Arab Spring stuff and after I'd been there 9 or 10 months, I was already looking for other work at this point, I was pretty fed up, it's like one of the only break-down melt-down things I can remember in my life. I tried to break up with my girlfriend. She wouldn't let me, basically. She said “you have to give me a reason,” and we sat there and talked and realized I was just redirecting problems with my job at her. Because I wasn't talking about them to anyone. It was a mess. And I should have been talking to someone about them earlier, but you don't want to lay it on someone else.*

A year later, not much had changed and Max's suggestions to mandate psychological counseling had not been implemented.

**Josh Santos:** *We get a bi-monthly visit from a psychologist. And they talk to us in a group or we have the option to talk one on one. But most people have other means of escape. There is not a script for work protocol, so you can leave your desk whenever you want and just come back whenever you want. So someone will just get up and go somewhere, take a smoke break. I would say dealing with the content, we don't really rely on each other to get over it. We might say something in passing, like “I saw this really gross video about this” but then we're just venting.*

Caitlyn's limited experience with the corporate counseling staff seemed to make it even more

difficult for her to cope with the stress of her job, as she preferred to leave the elements of the work she found difficult undiscussed.

***Caitlyn Brooks:** I've heard that they have, I think if you get the medical plan you can see or go to one session with a psychiatrist — which is like nothing. So people complained about it. I think there's supposed to have people to talk to. There's these people that come in every few months or something, but they kind of, when we had that meeting talking about stress, I was the only that was more stressed after, it like ruined my mood. I was like, “Why did I go to this?” I think some people have been upset that they don't have more services, but I don't think I really need them because I'm pretty fine.*

***STR:** What made you more stressed out? Just talking about being stressed out?*

***Caitlyn Brooks:** Yeah. And just like, and I wasn't really comfortable with the speakers. I guess they're just, it was really forced to talk about these things. And it became like, everyone was just complaining about the job. And I didn't trust the two psychologists. I was just like, “Who are you hippy dippy people just coming in, trying to make us talk about all our feelings and stuff we don't, we didn't like ever verbalize, and, I don't like you guys.” I just wanted to be like, I don't know. I was in a great mood before, and then in the beginning I just had this, what is that, fight or flight instinct to leave. But I didn't cause I wanted to be polite. I should have said, “Eff social convention,” cause I knew the meeting, I could tell it was just going to stress me out. But I didn't leave.*

Because of the workers' contract status at MegaTech, they did not receive health benefits as a part of the terms of their employment. In the context of the United States, until recently, access to health care and insurance has almost exclusively been related to employment status. For lower-wage workers and workers in other-than-full-time, permanent positions, even when such insurance benefits were on offer, they were often priced out of reach for those workers, and so many forewent insurance. With recent changes in U.S. policy regarding health care just

coming into effect, it remains to be seen what kinds of results it will hold for workers like the MegaTech CCM contractors. Even so, the kind of care they most needed, as a result of their jobs, was mental health care. This type of care may continue to be out of reach for many. Even when mental health care is available, people's attitudes of the stigma associated with seeking it out (such as those evinced by the workers here) means that many do not seek out mental health support or treatment for fear of what the acknowledgement of the need for care might mean about themselves or to others.

***STR:** You know I'm really sensitive to the fact that you've seen stuff you can't unsee. And stuff that you would never seek out.*

***Max Breen:** No, horror movies are ineffective at this point. I've seen all that stuff in real life.*

***Max Breen:** It's permanently damaging. I will never forget a lot of that stuff. And I don't dwell on it this point down the road, it's not something that two years on is, oh God, it's only been a year, hasn't it? I don't dwell on it daily, I don't dwell on it weekly, I wouldn't even say monthly, but every once and awhile, I couldn't even sit down and remember what some horrible videos I saw were, but every once and awhile you remember: "Oh, I saw a video about this" or similar to this. This one time my girlfriend and I were fooling around on the couch or something and she made a joke involving a horse. And I'd seen horse porn earlier in the day and I just shut down. Okay. Goodnight, I'm done. It's just these weird things that come out of nowhere. Rarely at this point. But I doubt, maybe a decade down the line, maybe I will stop encountering these things that bring it up, but who knows?*

### **The Revolving Door: MegaTech's Corporate Culture and the CCM Contractor Structure**

A company like MegaTech has vast wealth and resources available to it to hire virtually whomever it feels it has a business need for. Therefore, the structuring of its CCM team as made up of limited-term, third-party contractors must be understood as calculated and deliberate, and

done to achieve particular ends. I talked to the workers about what they suspected might be the reasons for that decision.

***STR:** Why do you think MegaTech went with contractors?*

***Max Breen:** Do I want to think they're benevolent or not? If they're benevolent: because no one should do this job for more than a year. No one. Realistically speaking, we're a very important part of that company that is under-appreciated and if you had full-time employees, and you know they pay us a lot but that is coming from someone who was just out of college and didn't have any experience with that . . . if you had those same people getting paid that same wage for years they wouldn't do it. They'd strike or they'd quit. The point is you would run into problems after two years, maybe three. It's not a healthy work environment and you need to have rotation or the department is going to collapse in on itself. Whether it's organizing to get a better deal or breakdown.*

***Max Breen:** . . . there was actually a really awesome article about [CCM workers] when I was working at MegaTech, I think they were interviewing the moderators for MySpace. And they were the ones in the shitty cubicles in Florida [working] for eight bucks an hour. And I remember that getting passed around the Internet with people wondering how many people there are like that — and there are so many of us and we're all unhappy.*

Josh's rationale for MegaTech's contractor-hiring motives was similar to that of Max's. He explained his perspective in detail:

***Josh Santos:** Their reasoning for it, MegaTech's reasoning for it is that psychologically it is not something you should do for longer than a year. And that's evident with the people who have a second contract. They have to wait three months before they decide to work again. I mean, I can't imagine . . . if this was, if I had the option of doing this full time I probably would. And that is not because it is enjoyable. But for me it is a stress-free job. I mean, this has been one of the least stressful years of my life. Just because I have been so comfortable with the*

*job. So I would keep working there even though I've demonstrated a pretty fair level of apathy towards what I do. But their reasoning is that psychologically you shouldn't do it for more than . . . I think the real reason is that you kind of get burned out. And after a year certain things slow you down work-wise. When I started, like my first few months, after I learned the policy really well, that's really when I peaked. I would say like four or five months in. It was when I had very clear knowledge of our policies and what I was expected to do, but as you keep working there and there is more discussion on certain policies or there is new edge cases that are brought up, like the more you kind of evaluate the policies and the more new things come that kind of topple what you've learned, you start to be more cautious and you go more slower. So I'd say after a year you are not performing at your best. That might be another reason why. You definitely become more comfortable, you start slowing down. Especially with the contract jobs. If you feel like you are not going to be back with employment afterwards, you just become slower, a little lazier. That's the only reason I can think of.*

Assuredly, burnout due to the constant viewing of troubling UGC was a factor among the CCM workers at MegaTech and elsewhere, as was burnout due to the rote, routine and factory-like nature of the work.

Yet there are a number of other reasons that MegaTech may have found for the arrangement of using precarious, temporary employees of third-party firms for their mission-critical CCM functions. Both Max and Josh cited the potential for psychological harm to the workers (while still being reluctant to articulate the harm that may have been done to them in their work environment). Max, too, acknowledged that one-year finite tours as contractors, generating constant turnover and little uniformity in management or loyalty to a particular firm, served as a foil to the kind of environment that would prove fertile ground for CCM worker organizing for better conditions or pay at MegaTech. By precluding terms longer than one year, offering a total possible two years of work in CCM, mandating a three-month break in between

contracts, and using, at times, up to three different contract companies to supply workers, MegaTech insured a fractured team of workers with little long-term investment in the firm. Likewise, MegaTech returned the favor to the CCM workers via lesser status and lower pay.

While MegaTech was, and continues to be, one of the most successful Internet companies of all time and is notorious for its lush working conditions and endless perks, the CCM contractors inhabited another status at MegaTech and were denied many of these benefits. Most critical in the case of the CCM team was the lack of health care, the mechanism by which many could have sought outside psychological counseling had they so desired. Instead, MegaTech provided periodic visits from a mental health counselor brought in by the company and offered voluntarily to the CCM team. Few people made use of this service. Yet by supplying the counselor, MegaTech was able to claim a bare minimum of due diligence in attempting to deal with employee mental health needs, while simultaneously distancing itself from the results of the job on the employees, as they were not and likely never would be MegaTech full-timers. In this way, MegaTech enacted a series of distancing moves designed to create a plausible deniability to limit their responsibility for any workplace harm, particularly when such harm may take time to show up — months or even years after the termination of the contract.

Commonplace in the information technology world, a matrix of contractors and sub-contractors working for huge tech firms frequently inhabit the lower echelons of work, both in status and pay (Quality Assurance [QA], IT support and help desk functions and so on). Indeed, these workers provide the originator of the contract with ability to quickly ramp up or ramp down a work force without having to bring them fully into their operation. But just as in the cases where these firms contract and sub-contract aspects of the manufacturing process to other parts of the world and are then able to claim little control over them or little responsibility for

them, workers, such as those of MegaTech's CCM team, exist in a similarly liminal territory, with the added confusion of being housed side-by-side to their higher-status counterparts.

True, too, was the fact that the contract status itself served as a source of dissatisfaction and frustration for members of the CCM team. Josh described his feelings at the close of the year, breaking down the myth of the Silicon Valley tech corporation as a fun or enjoyable place to be:

*Josh Santos: And MegaTech's supposed to be one of those places that doesn't feel like it has a strong corporate vibe, but it still exists. It's not, at the end of the day there's still a bottom line, and a feeling of being a cog rather than a catalyst for change in the company. Especially from the position of the contractor. And little things like contractors just because they are contractors get far fewer amenities. And even the people, the full-time employees, give you a different attitude just because you are a contractor. It didn't really change my perception of corporate structure. It's supposed to be, it wasn't like, it doesn't give me any feeling of security for the corporate structure in general. I feel like regardless of how modern or how quirky you want to present your corporation, there's still that sense that you have one role to fulfill and very little vertical mobility. You don't feel like part of a team, you feel part of a structure — one little piece that isn't recognized. MegaTech didn't really do much to make me feel otherwise despite . . . I mean the propaganda's there. You always hear that Walmart brainwashes their employees to think such-and-such ways, but that exists at MegaTech too.*

### **“Low-Hanging Fruit:” MegaTech and Global CCM Outsourcing**

When Max Breen began his employment at MegaTech, outsourcing CCM work to other parts of the world and other worksite configurations seemed like an unthinkable proposition. Max explained his opposition to me.

*Max Breen: You know, man, outsourcing in general is such a mess. In terms of our specific content, I don't think it works because anywhere that is going to hire*



*or provide employees for the price these companies want to pay, are going to be places like India or the Philippines . . . The culture is so dramatically different when you are trying to apply a policy that is based on a United States or Western Europe culture [pause] it doesn't work. So they tried outsourcing to India before I was there, and it was such a disaster that they just canceled it and said we have to do this all in-house . . . [the Indian contractors] would be removing pictures of people at the beach with their family in bikinis, because they are like, that's not appropriate for public consumption. So in very narrow terms of content moderation for a Western site, the outsourcing - they are going to be drastically underpaying, I can't imagine doing the job for less than they paid me. They paid me a decent amount, and it was still miserable. I can't imagine doing it for nothing. That was one of the only perks. We didn't get benefits. It was really draining and brutal. But I paid rent and I had enough left over for luxury items. Plenty left over, to be fair. But I can't imagine doing this for barely scraping by money. Couldn't do it.*

Despite Max's belief that outsourcing to India or other parts of the world would cause havoc for MegaTech, the firm had, a year on, pursued this very strategy. MegaTech still had its in-house contract CCM team but also employed call center/BPO outsourcing in other parts of the world to augment the in-house group and break apart tasks into lower- and higher-order ones. Josh Santos revealed another more frustrating problem with the outsourcing: the damage it was causing to the on-site contractors' metrics, or measures by which their job performance was evaluated. He describes this issue here:

**Josh Santos:** . . . *about four months into my contract we outsourced all of the so-called "low hanging fruit" videos. Which are spam and pornography. Things that instantly, it takes you a half second to recognize, you don't have to watch the video. Cause things like hate speech or someone sitting in front of a web cam talking for like, let's say, the duration of the video is 15 minutes and it says something like "Jews control such-and-such." You have no idea what this guy's*

*going to say. If it's going to be hate speech or if it's conspiracy talk, so you actually have to watch those. Where as if it is pornography or spam it is instantly recognizable. So we took all of those videos, which are most of our videos, I would say 60-70% of our stuff is spam and porn, and that all went to our team in India. So after that happened we had less than half the volume that we used to have. And so that just, that ruined our metrics. Cause that was something we were rated on: how much videos we do. And all of the sudden we have to find a new variable to test an admins competency. Cause now that we don't have these "low hanging fruit" we have way less volume.*

Josh also confirmed Max's worry that outsourcing to elsewhere in the world would lead to declining quality in the CCM work being done. His description and Max's highlighted the tension inherent in the trans-global partnering with outsourcing groups in different parts of the world and coming from different cultural, social and linguistic contexts.

*Josh Santos: All [Management] did was separate the queues. They all used to go to just one queue, and then we separated the porn queue and the spam queue. So basically India takes care of those. We have the option to go into those queues but then India would have nothing to do. Because we would destroy that queue in moments. Our team . . . I don't understand why but they didn't train the India team as thoroughly as they trained our team so, I don't know, they just have, they go through the queue a little slower. I don't know understand why they didn't train them . . . I don't know, I feel like they don't trust them quite yet to make the policy. And I mean there are a number of reasons for that. They are a brand new team. Just cultural differences. Like you notice there are things the India team takes down that are fine. Or a lot of things they leave up that are not fine. And there are just cultural differences.*

### **An Internet without CCM**

**STR:** *Can you imagine a MegaTech without people doing this work?*

**Max Breen:** *No. It would be 100% porn. [laughter] 100%. It would be a train*

*wreck. The awful part is it has to be done. It can't not be moderated. But there's no good way to do it.*

Even in light of Josh's consistent cynicism and dark outlook on CCM and his time at MegaTech throughout our interview, his closing words were strangely optimistic, in a sense; in them, he revealed a powerful ability to take the difficult content he internalized and turn it into a positive reflection on the human condition. This outlook may have been part of the key to his capability to muster a year serving as a CCM worker on MegaTech's team.

**Josh Santos:** *Despite the amount of violence I was exposed to this year . . . it was almost, I am just like in awe of humanity.*

**STR:** *You're almost what?*

**Josh Santos:** *Almost in awe of humanity. Because every time I thought that there's no way someone will trump the heinousness, someone would. Like you think it couldn't get any darker and then the next day you would see something darker. I mean, half the videos we see are fine. Like they're not violating a policy at all, so a lot of time I would see very creative stuff. It taught me to view humanity, to not take, to recognize there really are no limits to what the human mind can think of and accomplish. Because I have definitely seen things that in a million years I would never have expected a person to say or do. Good and bad. So it definitely gave me an almost uplifting . . . something to see how diverse we are.*

## **Chapter 6: The Life and Times of CCM Workers, In the Cloud and In the News**

*There really is no free speech on commercial sites. — Rick Roth*

### **The Life and Times of CCM Workers, Part Two: A Boutique in the Cloud**

At the time of our meeting, Rick Roth was a 55 year-old White Canadian ex-pat living in Mexico. A former wireless executive, he had retired from one career and then moved into the CCM arena at the behest of a friend and former co-worker, who founded the start-up, OnlineExperts, a boutique full-service content moderation and social media management specialty firm. After first declining to join his friend in the new venture, Rick eventually went back to work when he found the idle life of a retiree a bit too boring for his tastes and longed for the challenge of building a business in a new sector.

Rick was an affable and kind man who took content moderation seriously, and had a very client-oriented perspective; his years in the business world at the executive level were clear in his outlook and way of thinking about CCM and all the aspects of OnlineExperts' practices and policies. He was thoughtful and introspective about his responses, but his perspective was decidedly one of a manager or someone who thinks in much broader terms than simply the content moderation aspect of the business. His circumstances were decidedly different from the Silicon Valley workers, too, for whom CCM was their livelihood and provided an income upon which they depended fully. Rick was at the other end of the work life spectrum; doing CCM work by choice and, now, largely out of the day-to-day aspects of working on CCM himself. Yet his perspective provided valuable insights, not only from a management viewpoint, but also from that of a boutique firm. His understanding of CCM's role in a business environment predicated on a positive corporate Internet presence for his clients was an undercurrent that permeated all of his comments and his perspective on what OnlineExperts could provide.

Generous with his time, Rick spoke on Christmas Eve of 2012 via video chat from Mexico. Rick was in his home office, dressed in casual resort-style tropical leisurewear, as the sun streamed in through a window and I sat in Wisconsin, as the snow fell outside mine.

### ***Working Virtually, Working from the Cloud***

Rick got his start in CCM by doing the moderation himself in OnlineExperts' early days and moved on to developing the corporate protocols and training processes for the firm's moderators and teams. He described in detail the various levels of the company and how the employees interacted among them and with each other. The firm's 260 employees were dispersed around the world. Although the company is based in Canada, there is no OnlineExperts physical headquarters or campus and all work is conducted from the workers' homes or other workspaces of preference, and facilitated by the Internet.

***Rick Roth:*** *So I started in 2008, early 2008, I was actually employee number seven with the company. And we now have about 260. So we've grown a lot in the last four years — that's five years, I guess — so we've grown from me being number seven to, we just hired our 260th person. So as the company grew, of course, I started out moderating content in 200-early 2008, and as we grew, just my management experience and all that just sort of led me to grow with the company and take more senior positions, so I'm certainly not retired anymore.*

In his time with the OnlineExperts, the firm had experienced exponential growth, a reflection not only of Rick's business acumen and ability to solicit clients, but also closely mirroring the rise and popularity of social media platforms. As the social media landscape transformed from users interacting in forums and comment sections into a variety of platforms and using a variety of media, the firm transformed with it.

***Rick Roth:*** *. . . In 2002, that's really what [OnlineExperts was] doing, was content moderation. Over the years — and basically at that time we started*

*moderating, we were really moderating news content for newspaper websites, we were doing some video, uh, television show moderation, live video broadcasts where people could text in their requests and comments and that type of a thing. So we had to moderate that type of thing. And 2008 we landed our first big client, a media company that we started doing the online moderation for. That one was really the bir — no one had started doing that. There was nobody out there. Any moderating, newspapers were doing themselves. So we started doing that, and that led to another newspaper, and that led to another, another newspaper site, and at that time there really were no brand pages for Facebook, either, I mean, this was really in its infancy. So as we started to, to grow some of these media companies and others said, “Kay, we’ve got a Facebook page here and we want that content moderated.” So that sort of branched into the moderation of Facebook pages, and then as things — you know, more recently, Google+ and Instagram and YouTube brand pages, those type of things have added to it, but now a lot of our revenue comes from actual community management, where we’re the face of the brand.*

Unlike the CCM workers at MegaTech, who trekked each day on MegaTech’s corporate buses to their Silicon Valley campus for on-site work (with the occasional day working from home), the OnlineExperts team was entirely globally dispersed. There was no physical headquarters, no office, no central place that workers or teams gathered. Instead, they worked virtually and usually out of their homes, from wherever in the world they were located. Rick discussed the staffing model at OnlineExperts with me at length, and how the company relied on a variety of commercially available Internet tools to facilitate the workflow of the company’s many employees. These tools were primarily publicly available and cloud and Web-based, which also provided a low technology infrastructure overhead to OnlineExperts, in addition to the cost savings effected by not having any physical locations. Rick did not seem to have any concerns about the fact that the tools and services the company was using were completely outside the

control of the firm, however.

**Rick Roth:** . . . Our 260 employees, we have no offices. So everyone from our CEO on down works out of their home. So we rely on those type of tools, the communication tools, we think we've got it pretty well down to a science. We use chat rooms for individual teams, so we have 13 client services managers, so each of them has a team chat room that, uh — anyone in management can go into any of these chat rooms but these are really for the moderators on that team to collaborate, you know, "Heads up, this is going on," "This site, keep an eye out for it," and also it's sort of a water cooler type of thing, so they can, you know, meet and chat, let off some stress, and it's not just you sitting all by yourself in your house working, you've got a team somewhere else in the world, or you know, in North America, or wherever you are, that you can chat with. Uh, we use Google Talk for individual chats back and forth. We use Google Hangout, you can put up to ten people in there so team meetings often take place in Google Hangout, or AnyMeeting, which is another, or GoToMeeting, what else do we use. Skype, of course. And the telephone. So those are the communication tools that we use, they're all publicly available; we have nothing proprietary there. We use Google Sites as a platform, so each of the team has their own site, and a subset of that is client sites that contain all the client-specific information. We've got a group of technology guys that have built moderation tools, so they've actually designed the tools that pull the content out of Facebook into our tool, we modify or delete the content, it deletes it off the Facebook page, so on.

With the exception of this very minimal tool developed for OnlineExperts, the company not only avoided automation and specialized platforms to deal with their CCM and brand management functions, but actually prided themselves on this aspect of their process, and Rick considered it a selling point of the company's service:

**Rick Roth:** No one's — and that's one of the pitches that we do to our clients, is that we use human-powered moderation. We don't use robots, we don't use filters, we don't try to automate this process, we have human power, which, you

*know, it leads to a great deal of accuracy versus filters and tools, but it also – to err is human, so [some errors] are going to happen.*

Without the same level of engineering expertise and available labor to create custom tools, OnlineExperts had managed to develop a system that was reliant on employee mastery of particular workflow norms, as well as the ability to quickly seek out information relevant to a particular brand or product for which they were moderating. In this way, OnlineExperts put its full trust and responsibility for accurate, timely and appropriate CCM decisions on the shoulders of its moderators.

### ***CCM for Dummies: Social Media Expertise as Brand Protection***

While the firm began as a strictly CCM operation, offering its services to news and media companies challenged by the comments sections of their online properties that could quickly devolve into unusable hostile zones, the business quickly expanded into other areas of social media management as quickly as the need for it arose. OnlineExperts focused its services on companies that did not have expertise in social media and whose primary business was something other than social media or technology, in general. For this reason, the firm saw an opportunity to expand its own services to meet the needs of companies who wanted a presence across many social media platforms (e. g, Facebook; Twitter; Instagram) but lacked the expertise and knowledge to properly manage their brand identities in all of these spaces, particularly in the event of a crisis precipitated by a social media flare-up or unexpected reaction to a campaign. Rick described where OnlineExperts fit into a client's business model and what they provided:

***Rick Roth:*** . . . *That's sort of the way we identify ourselves: brand protection. More brand protection, but also brand management. And many of the brand management — we're actually hired by advertising agencies, so the agency manages the brand and in many cases, they'll supply us with a calendar of content or, you know, they work with us to create content for specific sites.*



Not only were OnlineExperts' CCM employees responsible for monitoring and taking down problematic content that might pose a threat to a brand, but they also actually created new content, seeding sites with messages and discussion points designed to encourage customer participation and engagement, and to bring a positive face to the brand or product. All of this activity was done surreptitiously, without OnlineExperts employees ever identifying themselves as such, instead posting under the moniker of the company or brand, or even posing as other regular, unaffiliated consumers.

***Rick Roth:** So we're posting on behalf of the brand. We're engaging with consumers, and so on. So we still do a lot of moderation, all the sites require moderation, but it has expanded to a lot more. Also analysis and reporting, what is going across, what are people saying about your brand across the whole social media spectrum, and sentiment analysis, whether the comments are positive, negative. People call us in for a crisis. We've never worked with some of these clients before and suddenly somebody does something stupid at the organization and their Facebook page blows up and they call us in for a crisis. Here's a perfect example of the weirdest thing I've ever heard, but [a snack company], a year ago or so posted a pro-[LGBT image] . . . and within four hours they had over 20,000 comments on their Facebook page, many homophobic rants and so on. Why people are doing that on a [snack food brand's] Facebook page, I have no idea, but they called us in to help manage that, and so that kind of thing goes on fairly regularly.*

In such a case, OnlineExperts would be called in to manage the ensuing mess and mitigate the damage, deleting unflattering and hostile comments and seeding the brand's many social media profiles with positive messages to redirect the flow of conversation. These activities would take place covertly, without a clear indication that the postings were coming from a firm hired to encourage positive engagement with a product or brand, or to delete messages that detracted from that brand's identity. In this way, OnlineExperts operated behind the scenes, steering

content and engagement to meet a particular brand's desired outcomes.

OnlineExperts was able to tailor its online brand management to a client's own profile, develop a particular brand voice for that client and achieve particular outcomes as agreed upon between the client and the firm. This level of attention to detail and tailoring to a specific client's needs, as well as its ability to manage facets of the user experience and brand identity across numerous social media platforms, is characteristic of boutique-style firms such as OnlineExperts.

Additionally, while OnlineExperts is a Canadian firm, it has numerous large multinational clients based across North America, and its moderators needed to be able to adjust for cultural context, as well as to each client's particular profile and values. This was a challenging aspect to the business, as Rick told it, and the CCM staff at OnlineExperts needed to be adept at moving among many different profiles with different tolerances for risk and for controversial content, in order to match a client's profile. They also needed to be aware of issues that shifted and changed based on where a company was located in the world.

**Rick Roth:** . . . *It's difficult to keep the brand voice consistent unless you create — and we do this as well — we create templates that say, “if the poster says this, here's the canned response,” but a lot of clients don't want canned responses. They want a canned response put in your own words but to still reflect the brand. So training people on what is that brand culture, what is that brand voice, and how do we change these answers into your own words but still reflect the brand? So that's an ongoing training challenge in community management. In terms of moderation of content, it's, again, every site has their own set of values and moderation guidelines. So one of the challenges is, some of our moderators work on multiple brands simultaneously, and being able to remember or distinguish between the brands that, uh, especially with news commentary. Some of the news outlets are very liberal in terms of what they allow, some are very strict, so it's remembering what, if I'm moderating, you know, a Canadian website here that's very very strict, and then I move over to, and on the same shift I'm also*

*moderating, you know, [an American news site] – I shouldn't say, that one's not very liberal, either, in some ways – but you need to keep that straight and as a moderator you need to know which guidelines fit which account, or have a quick reference to check each comment, versus what's allowable.*

### ***Employee Values; Corporate Needs: The Employees of OnlineExperts***

Over the years, OnlineExperts' contractor profile had morphed along with the portfolio of clients and suite of services it was able to offer. Unlike MegaTech, who actively sought young, and presumably social-media-savvy recent college grads for its CCM team, OnlineExperts needed a different kind of expertise in the early days, and so sought out early retirees and people above 40 to handle the news sites.

***Rick Roth:*** *Ah, it actually, when we started with the news commentary, you know, it's not a great-paying job being a moderator. You know, it's ten bucks an hour, which is, you know, not bad, but it's not – for a home-based business, you're guaranteed hours and so on. When we started with the big news sites we hired college kids and part-timers, but we quickly found out that they were not the right people to work on news sites because, even though they were university, college, they really have no historical context for what went on in the world.*

Although OnlineExperts initially had to shift from younger to older moderators for newspaper website moderation, once their work began to include social media sites, they had to shift back to younger CCMers.

***Rick Roth:*** *Many of those people are still with us, but they are not comfortable with other social media entities. They don't use Facebook, they don't use Twitter, so as we started moderating the Facebook pages, we, our demographic changed to a younger demographic who were more comfortable using those tools and understood the context of what a Facebook post was and why, you know, why people posted on Facebook, which, I don't want to say the older generation because I'm pretty old to be in the social media space, I'm 55, but I've kept up with it, whereas many people my age don't understand the logic behind it or the*

*compelling – the reason why you want to be on Facebook. So it’s changed to a younger demographic, and now that we’re doing a lot of engagement, it’s changing again.*

As with all the other CCM workers I spoke with, Rick identified the need for moderators to understand the difference between their own values and that of their client, and to be able to compartmentalize the former while on the job, in favor of working from the perspective of the latter. This was a particular challenge when working in the fast-moving newspaper and media company forums, particularly during major news events. This could be a great source of difficulty for some CCM workers, and they would not know it until they were in the proving ground of a live and heated situation that directly challenged their moral code.

***Rick Roth:*** . . . *This [issue of personal values] recently came up again with the Connecticut shootings and the people working on the news sites. Uh, the challenge is putting aside your personal philosophy, your beliefs, your creed, and moderating to the client’s wishes. Some of the news sites might be pro NRA, some might be anti-pro-gun control, so you need to put aside your personal beliefs and moderate, not, “I think that comment is appropriate or not appropriate,” but “I have to leave it up because the client says it’s appropriate.” And there are people who can’t deal with that. They can’t put aside their personal beliefs and philosophies and do a good job of moderating, because it’s totally against their beliefs. So that’s sort of a thing that you can’t really hire and say, “Can you do that?” because everybody says they can do that, but it’s, you know, will it cause them distress? We had people say they couldn’t sleep at night, not because the belief system, but because the comments were so horrible. You know, people, whether it’s gun control, or whether it’s homophobia, or whether in Canada, the whole Native Indian versus White people issue is a huge thing in Canada, and the comments can be very racist or homophobic, and being able to put that aside at the end of your shift is critical to be a good moderator, and uh, in some ways, you can train people to do that, but in some ways you really can’t. So there are times*

*where someone leaves us just because they can't deal with that content, or they prefer to moderate something, you know, Facebook generally isn't as bad as news sites. They can become a real cesspool . . .*

Rick also expressed a bias against international workers in call center/BPO and microlabor settings, much as the CCM team at MegaTech did. In Rick's case, he considered the refusal to use such labor as a point of positive differentiation for OnlineExperts. Nevertheless, all employees were considered contractors from a tax and employment status perspective. It was unclear whether or not OnlineExperts offered any type of benefits to its employees; from Rick's comments and the fact that employees were located all over the world, it was likely that they did not. Treating workers with a "contractor" status likely facilitated the ability to avoid the need to comply with any local (i.e., Canadian) labor mandates and allowed OnlineExperts to draw a labor pool from wherever it had a need, ramping up — or down — according to its business and clientele.

***Rick Roth:*** *Well, all of our employees — they're full or part time, but they're all employees. We don't contract out [through other labor suppliers], so all of these — some of the employees are long-term contractors, you know, we have international people, it's a Canadian-based company, but because I live in Mexico I'm considered a contractor, even though I'm an employee of the company. But we don't third-party contract out to other moderation service companies and so on. These are all people that work, you know, exclusively for us in terms of moderation companies. Some of them have other part-time jobs or full-time jobs and do this part time, but yeah, so they're all of our — we consider them our employees.*

### ***“Sometimes the Words Get Mixed Up”:* Cultural and Linguistic Authenticity as Commodity**

Rick cited the notion of sociocultural and linguistic authenticity of the moderators as key to the decision to not go beyond OnlineExperts' own pool of vetted CCM contractors,

particularly when employees engaged in seeding forums or online spaces with content, or engaging with the public. In other words, OnlineExperts sought to provide services from employees who were imperceptibly Western and could slip seamlessly into the flow of conversation or social media content dominated by English-speaking American or Canadian participants. Given the often covert participation of the OnlineExperts employees in these spaces, the ability to not draw undue attention to oneself as inauthentic or unnatural, and, thus, away from the brand message or to the CCM activity, was a fundamental measure of success. In these contexts, a non-local turn of phrase or unnatural grammatical construction could have unveiled the engagement as that of a CCM employee and not of, say, just another fan of a snack food talking up a product. Insider linguistic and cultural knowledge therefore was a key asset that the OnlineExperts CCM staff brought to their work.

***Rick Roth:** Many of our clients or prospects that we sell to, they prefer that we do the work. So, there's offshore companies that can do some of this stuff cheaper than we can, but many of [our client's] brands, in fact, most of the brands, English is the primary language. So they really want people with English as a first language moderation, and especially when it comes to engagement in community management, um, you know, some people with English as a second language can speak and write quite well, but sometimes the words get mixed up, or the, uh, tenses get mixed up, and it comes across as inappropriate for the brand. So the business decision really is that we want--our — selling point is we do this ourselves. We don't hire third parties to do this.*

As OnlineExperts' client base expanded, so, too, did its need for authenticity in other cultural and linguistic contexts and competencies beyond North America and English. Their ability to provide native speakers and people familiar with cultural contexts and social norms in other parts of the world was an important feature of their suite of services on offer. In short, the authenticity that OnlineExperts could provide had great value for its clients.

**Rick Roth:** *One of our clients is [a news channel in] Saudi Arabia, so we've got a group of moderators that are in that area. We also have some of them located in Canada that are of an Arabic background, uh, that moderate that and the guidelines are very different for something compared to, you know, [an American newspaper of record] or something like that. So it's those cultural sensibilities who are moderating in another language. We moderate in about twenty languages altogether. So we've got people spread around the world, or we've got ex-pats like myself, we've got people in Mexico that are of, that are Canadian or American, but we've also got Mexicans that Spanish is their first language, we moderate in [Spanish], so it's really interesting dealing with the different cultural sites and reading the guidelines on how things differ from country to country.*

### ***“I Just Put it Aside”:* Managing the Job at OnlineExperts**

As a manager, Rick expressed concern over CCM worker well-being, but the virtual office aspect of OnlineExperts meant that, unlike the MegaTech workers, employees were never in the same place at the same time, were not able to take lunches together or meet after a shift for drinks and down time, and did not have access to any counseling services, cursory as those may have been at MegaTech. It was a challenge, from Rick's perspective, to encourage the moderators to create a healthy distance between their work and their time off the job.

Rick's actual knowledge of the impacts of the job on his employees was somewhat limited and was based solely on his observations, and his own experiences from several years ago doing the CCM work himself. He would notice workers having trouble disconnecting from time to time, and worried about it not only from an employee well-being standpoint, but because of the fact that such constant engagement could lead to faltering quality in moderation for clients and to potential burnout. Rick felt that the very nature of the job – working from home, always just a few clicks or a smartphone check away, 24/7 in nature – was a contributing factor to problems related to an inability to disengage.

**Rick Roth:** . . . We get the same feedback [from our CCM workers], is, you know, whether it's full time or part timers, "Our clients don't know how much we care about what happens on their sites." You know, it's amazing, the people that, we're of course working 24/7, there's people 24/7, but many of those who work, you know, on their shift, they're still in our internal chat rooms . . . They're still on there hours after their shift is because they want to know what's going on. So people get so invested in their job that, and it's a challenge, too, because you're working at home. You don't necessarily get in your car and drive home and sort of put it aside. Your computer's still on.

Rick identified his own ability to compartmentalize his on-the-job experiences as one of the factors that had led to his success in CCM; a sentiment that the CCM workers from MegaTech also shared. Yet such compartmentalizing is not something that all people are able to successfully do, and it is not clear if behavior leading to a fracturing or bifurcation of aspects of one's work experience completely from that of other parts of life leads to balance or denial, or what consequences it might raise further down the road. From the interviews with the MegaTech workers, it was clear that, even when the CCM workers thought they were successful in separating their work from other aspects of their private and non-work lives, they were not always capable of doing so. Additionally, Rick's relative financial and material comfort provided him with outlets for unwinding likely not available to most CCM workers.

**Rick Roth:** So the challenge really is that – maintaining concentration for your full shift, you know, getting the guidelines right, and being able to at the end of the day, put all of that aside and it doesn't matter what anybody wrote, or . . . When I was moderating, at the end of the day I'd jump in the pool or we'd have friends over, and they'd say, "Oh, what happened in the news today, you've been on all day." I have no idea. I just put it aside, where other people can't.

### **"Not for the Faint-Hearted": On the Nature of the Net and CCM Intervention**

It was apparent, throughout our interview, that the Internet was an entirely pragmatic



space in Rick's world. For him, and OnlineExperts, it served two purposes: it existed as a site of commerce and commercial engagement for corporate entities and their brands and products, and it facilitated the work he and his firm did to support the activities of companies in engaging with the consumer public. Rick, therefore, had very little romantic attachment to the idea of social media as a site of democratic engagement, of the merit of all speech, or of all speech being of value or being equal, or the idea of the Internet as a free speech zone, in general. Instead, he saw the Internet as a series of zones of commerce, in which companies were free to set terms of engagement and he and his employees were imbued with a duty to enforce those terms.

***Rick Roth:** . . . On many of these sites, particularly news websites, there's a lot of folks saying, "Why was my post deleted? What right do you have to delete my opinion?" But what they forget is, it's a private site. You can go around naked in your own home, but you can't go around naked in Wal-Mart. It's the same thing. You're on someone else's site and you've agreed to the terms and conditions, as everybody has to when they sign up, so there really is no free speech on commercial sites, particularly. If you want free speech, you can start your own blog and you can allow whatever happens, that would be probably be true free speech. But as soon as you're on a business or commercial site where you agreed to terms and conditions, it's not free anymore. And, you know, I'm Canadian, so from a Canadian perspective, there is no free speech in the Constitution anyway. There are certain laws – there are things you can't say.*

Appeals by disgruntled users to "the First Amendment," which Rick was quick to point out was a particularly American conceit and held much less sway for a Canadian such as himself, and other sorts of hue and cry over deletions or other CCM activities did not persuade him in the least.

Rick was clear on the goals of OnlineExperts and, by extension, those of the clients that solicited their services.

***Rick Roth:** And it doesn't even translate within the U.S. because [even there] you*

*can't say whatever you want. You know, you can go a lot further than you can in some countries, but it's really not pure freedom, because there is some kind of censorship or there are sensibilities, maybe, that restrict that angle, so. You can't yell "fire" in the theater. If it were pure free speech, you could. You know, so, there are rules and guidelines in every aspect of society, just as there are on the Internet, as much as some people don't like it, or don't like to admit it, or don't want to admit it.*

Ultimately, Rick's view of CCM was that it was a critical function without which the Internet would be largely unusable for most people. Yet he recognized the need for balance in how and when the CCM workers of OnlineExperts chose to intervene. This balance required human sophistication and expertise to mediate; it was a sweet spot that OnlineExperts strove to locate and negotiate with their interventions.

**STR:** . . . *What do you think the Internet would look like without content moderation?*

**Rick Roth:** *It would be a cesspool. You know, in fact, one of our clients has – we monitor all the stories that they publish and we monitor all those comments and there's also a section called "Forums," which basically they say on the map, "Here be dragons." You know, beware if you're gonna post on the forum, because without the moderation there's a lot of infighting. I don't think it's possible to change someone's mind by posting on the Internet, so if there's political or religion or even sports teams, people get really aggressive and a lot of personal attacks . . . yeah, sites that don't have moderation at all are not a place for the faint-hearted, because they really degenerate quickly. And that's sort of the challenge of balancing moderation is, you know, you can't just only allow positive comments. There has to be a — you know, the newspapers or Facebook brands, they want people to come to their site. When you start overly harshly moderating, they're gonna lose readers, lose – because if you only allow positive mentions of the brand, that's not realistic either. So it's that balance of, where is that line of what's appropriate, and where does it fall to not appropriate? And it*

*very easily falls to not appropriate if you let something go and don't moderate it.  
But where is that tipping point of, this one's okay and that one's not?*

For Rick, OnlineExperts, and the clients they serve, brand protection trumps all other ideas of speech; indeed, the speech they regulate has very little to do with democratic free expression, and much more to do with client and brand engagement with consumers.

But what space on the Internet today is not, in some way, commercial? Very few. The Internet is also a platform of surveillance and a zone of control. It's a series of highly-regulated protocols and processes, built on the back end of commercially controlled pipes, but also on the front end, or user-facing side, where agents such as these are moderating and manipulating content to a particular end. In this way, CCM is just as critical a mechanism of control as the other protocols and mechanisms that govern data flow online, but one that is much less known and perhaps even less predictable. The activities of OnlineExperts, and its content manipulation involving the brand reputation of a snack food company at first blush seem fairly innocuous, but also suggest that much more might be at stake.

### **The Life and Times of CCM Workers, Part Three: Online in the News**

Melinda Green and I talked in person in the summer of 2012 in New York City, where she lived at the time with her partner, a digital news executive who had previously held positions with several different American national papers of record, as well as high-level positions in a Silicon Valley-based Internet news and content pioneer, YouNews. Melinda's experience with CCM work had been as a contractor, working a CCM gig 40 hours per week from home, in Los Angeles, for her partner's company.

A 40-something queer-identified White woman with a varied employment background in creative fields, including in the graphic design and fashion industries, Melinda came to CCM with a long history of participating online in numerous social media venues and in Internet

communities. In particular, she had participated actively as a volunteer moderator on the online community and personal blogging site DearDiary in forums of interest to her, and had moderated some highly contentious and high-volume forums there. It was her connection to YouNews via her partner, and her experience doing moderation on a voluntary basis, that brought her the opportunity to work full time, as an hourly contractor in a paid position for YouNews on the company's digital news sites. We talked in person one evening in her comfortable Chelsea apartment that she shared with her partner, Kris, who was also present, as were several elderly cats.

At the time we spoke, Melinda was the furthest removed of all those I talked to from her CCM experience; her tenure at YouNews had begun in 2007 and ended in 2008. Nevertheless, some four years later, she had no trouble recalling her role, and her feelings about the job, which were largely negative. In particular, she was insightful about her own personal identity and values, and the way they often put her at odds with the content she was required to screen and in which she was immersed for much of the day. She also reflected on her paid CCM role in contrast to the work she did on a voluntary basis at DearDiary. Finally, she had strong feelings about the value of social media as a site of expression, and its impact on both other users and people who viewed the content generated in it for a living.

***Melinda Green:** Well, I was going to start going to fashion design school, um, I had a very successful job that I could have stayed at indefinitely. I was a graphic designer and production artist, but I don't drive, so I found myself on the bus for three to four hours a day, because that is how Los Angeles rolls. And it was impacting my spouse because she would have to, you know, drop everything in the middle of the night and come pick me up. And she was finding herself cooking all of our meals and such because I was just working all the time. And then it's kind of dangerous to take the bus at night in LA. So she was like, why don't you just do*

*the thing you've always wanted to do anyway and just go to school? So I was very lucky in that because she worked at YouNews, and there was a need for [CCM]. And she was cognizant of this — they were just starting to do these deals with [a TV news magazine] and YouNews . . . And I'm sure that without her being there I would not have been paid the hourly salary at the wage that I was paid. I would have ended up getting significantly less.*

At the start of her contract with YouNews, the company was expanding to host forums and online discussion areas for many other brands and properties. Much like OnlineExperts, YouNews' primary concern was not facilitating speech in these spaces, but, rather, brand management and protection for their own brand and the properties with whom they had contracted. Also like OnlineExperts, YouNews asked Melinda to not only moderate comments that other people posted, but to generate discussion and encourage participation from users by steering conversations in a particular direction, or steering users to particular stories or forums with comments she made. She found that aspect of the job particularly difficult, verging on the ridiculous.

**Melinda Green:** *Because I had this experience with the community management with DearDiary and because I have, like, copy editor experience as well, and arts experience, it was presented to me as sort of a hybrid thing. Um, that you know, I would be helping with, again, protecting those brands, those brand relationships . . . I only did comment moderation in these other branded properties, where they had something to lose with another client or another company. So yeah. It was presented to me as sort of a hybrid position. From the start. But with an emphasis on the comments. And I found that I actually ended up doing mostly comments. But I did end up doing a lot of photo uploading and viral . . . I wasn't so great at the viral stuff. Like, it's hard. I couldn't go in as an actual YouNews person, I had to be all sneaky about it. So I had to make all of these fake identities to go into the YouNews groups and be like, "Hey! There's this great piece on roller skating! You should go check it out!!" [laughter]*

## ***Identity, Enforcing Civility and the Specter of Free Speech***

Early on in her CCM career, Melinda found herself struggling with how to enforce civility and still allow for the free flow of ideas, all the while trying to protect YouNews and its relationships with other properties represented in the online forums. She found this balance almost impossible to strike, particularly as the comments and content turned to expressions of racism, homophobia, sexism and threats.

**Melinda Green:** *You know, I think the number one thing that pissed me off about being a comment moderator was that all I could do was delete a comment. I couldn't [directly] comment on it, I couldn't say re-direct the conversation. You know, if I did, in frustration, finally like go in as a pseudonym and be like, "I am the moderator." So what would happen is, they would always assume you were male. And they would call you a fag. And say that you were censoring them. And, "Be a man! Man up and like come over here and tell me to a face why you are deleting my comments, bro!" You know, "Censorship, First Amendment, arghhh!" And I would be like, "This is ridiculous." And finally, in many cases I just couldn't keep up with deleting the comments and I would go on and be like "I am the comment moderator and I'm not censoring you, you are saying 'porch monkey' and 'wetback' and that's unacceptable in this forum." And then they'd figure out, cause I write like a girl I guess, then they would be like, "You bitch! You cunt! I'm going to rape you." So it's like, you can't really win. So the frustrating thing about that was the implication that you're taking away [someone's] First Amendment right. So I would assume that, which I don't agree with, I think it's stupid, but I would assume that the [YouNews] upper management was like, "We don't want to get in that fight, we don't want people to think we're censoring them." But don't get me started. My head explodes when I try to think about that.*

Melinda's empathy for marginalized people made the attacks levied by other users on the sites she moderated even more difficult for her to deal with, along with her own strong

identification with people who were subject to abuse in their daily lives. She sensed a profound hypocrisy in the way that the right to express oneself seemed always to give more power to abusive users than to those being abused, and she had a personal sense of altruism and a notion of wanting to protect users from those attacks. It was a responsibility that weighed heavily on her shoulders.

***Melinda Green:** And weighing for me, it was very important to weigh those, the freedom of somebody to be a hater against the freedom of, say, viewers of color or gay viewers not to be, like, traumatized when they go on the site. You know? How is the right of you to say a shitty thing weigh more than the right of someone not to, like, who gets called “fag” all day on the street, to not come onto an online forum and get called “fag” all over again? Why is your right to say “fag” more valuable than the right of this person to not hear “fag fag fag” all of the time? Come on dummies! You know?*

In addition to the constant homophobic slurs, Melinda identified racial epithets as a source of great consternation. Despite lists of words that were filtered out automatically, posters constantly found ways around the system, using inventive methods to post banned words, or using creative permutations of racial epithets that Melinda had to even periodically look up to recognize.

***Melinda Green:** Profanity is obviously a big one. But even YouNews has filters for the basic stuff. You can't say “shit.” You can't just type out the N-word. That's just not, nobody, so I didn't have to see that too much. But people will find a way to work around it. So again, yes, profanity, but that's where the whole “porch monkey” and “wetback” thing come in. Because the lists are never long enough. Because there is unfortunately so many racial epithets that . . . Like, you just see it . . . you're just soaking in it. You know? Yuck.*

Here Melinda highlighted the need for CCM to be a human process. But, as in the case of the other Western CCM workers, she believed that her cultural and linguistic competencies made

her a more skilled worker when it came to dealing with racial and other kinds of abuse.

***Melinda Green:** . . . this is where having somebody in the Philippines doing this is deeply ineffective. Or having it automated. Because you are going to get people trying every single way to say the N-word. And they will figure out any way around the filters. You know, just throw a couple asterisks in there and you've got a, you can say it. You know? I mean, in between you can still see the whole word. Um, the disparaging comments, even if there's no actual profanity, the comments about a lot of scripture . . . Just so much scripture. It's like religion as a weapon was just so like, that's the first thing I would look for. And I don't read a lot of Bible myself, but it was always the same "You are going to hell." It was never like, "Judge not." It was always, "You are going to hell, you are an abomination, you suck." Um, I didn't tolerate that. I don't know. Someone else might think that's okay. For me, I just don't think that's acceptable. I think that's not even a passive aggressive way of hurting people — that's pretty aggressive. So that was the thing. Tons and tons of rape jokes. And "bitch." And "make me a sandwich."*

Melinda was acutely aware of her own multiple, intersectional identities, and how they clashed with what she was required to read and see as a CCM worker. She struggled with the fact that it seemed to make her a target or more susceptible to experiencing the attacks she was subjected to as personal, and how she felt she needed to sublimate these aspects of herself in order to do a good job at moderation. She talked about this throughout our interview.

***Melinda Green:** Uh, yeah. I'm queer, I'm femme, I'm an atheist, I'm pretty much a working-class identified woman, I'm married, I'm pretty what much these people hate . . . So anyway, that's my identity and as I mentioned earlier, that was not necessarily a prudent identity to make public when you're trying to do a moderation job. Because they are going to automatically accuse you of liberal bias or whatever. Whereas if you were, the assumption is that as a straight White man you would be somehow more objective . . . ? I don't really follow that logic, but okay . . . You know, that whole default category thing. Um, so yeah. If I had*



*been able to have more empowerment in terms of having an official moderator hat, special avatar, different colored name, or whatever . . . I would have probably had to choose a very neutral thing. Like just “YouNews moderator.” I couldn't have outed myself as even female, let alone any of my other identities because the abuse you would get from that is just . . . And then they assume that your moderation is invalid too, so . . . You know.*

### ***“I Used to Call Myself a Sin Eater”: The Effects of CCM Work***

As Melinda continued with her CCM work for YouNews, she found herself more and more invested in it, devoting time that was supposed to be outside of her shifts to thinking about what might be transpiring in the absence of her moderation. She began to put in more time than her contract called for, and her mental energy was eaten up by worry and upset caused by what she experienced in the forums she moderated. Her anxiety levels increased and she felt great responsibility to intervene to protect others.

***Melinda Green:*** *Well I mean, I actually cried a lot. And I felt dirty all the time when I was doing that job. And I got pretty anxious about, you know, I was supposed to work 40 hours a week, and I ended up working many more than that. Just because I couldn't . . . You know, I'd duck out of class and like check the things cause if I was getting into it with somebody in particular I just couldn't stand that stuff to be up there. Just knowing how it was affecting me, I didn't want other people to be affected by it. I, in my personal life, have gone out of my way to limit severely contact with abhorrent people that are shitty. Specifically about these identities of mine and my friends and people I care about. So actually, having to deal directly with them was really hard. It was a bit of a shock after a while . . . And you do get very invested in like, I think I probably took on that protector role even more because it was a way to shield myself from really taking personally some of the stuff that was going on. There was, um, and I used humor a lot. I would make fun of some of the really bad comments, just because they were so awful. I never saw an uploaded photo of child porn, but there were two*

*incidents that I actually reported where somebody made comments about like child raping. And it was so disturbing.*

At the same time, Melinda recognized her limited ability to effect change of any sort. It led her to feelings of frustration and hopelessness.

**Melinda Green:** . . . I mean it's the Internet. Free speech. You can talk about raping kids all you want, as far as I can tell. [Bitter laughter]

**STR:** Your recourse was to delete and report.

**Melinda Green:** And that's all I could do. It's a very disempowering job.

**STR:** Did you feel frustrated?

**MG:** Completely frustrated. And I used to call myself a sin eater.

**STR:** A "sin eater?"

**Melinda Green:** Yeah. Like I was absorbing all of this negative energy. And, you know, I wasn't making any kind of difference because they are just going to go say it somewhere else. If you go to weather.com . . . weather.com . . . Literally! There are pages and pages of people like quoting scripture about how gays are going to die and go to hell. I mean, it's the weather! You could post about a kitten and it would be like "Faggot wetback porch monkey Obama's a Muslim socialist commie scripture." And like maybe two comments of any kind of "Oh, what a cute kitten." You know? [laughter] So, I don't know, I like to tell myself that this is just a few teenage boys sitting in their basement being anti-social but there were so many of them. It really made me really a lot less likely to assume the best of my fellow humans. There's a lot of ugly out there. And it can't all be coming from just a few people.

### ***The Nature of "Community," Online and Offline***

Melinda's longtime experience as a volunteer moderator on a variety of online sites and social media platforms gave her an interesting point of comparison for how the work of CCM differed from those other experiences. She noted, in particular, her lack of agency and control in

her work for YouNews on CCM versus that which she had in other spaces, and a lack of clear resources or sites of support or escalation for the issues she encountered while doing CCM. She also highlighted the nature of online community in a space like DearDiary's "Questioning Whiteness" forum, where people self-selected and where the conversations were very tightly moderated and very clearly bounded by guidelines and rules adhered to by all participants. Indeed, Melinda found the very notion of "community" in the context of YouNews to be misleading and a misnomer. She viewed the site's forums as much less of a community and much more a space for people to enact hostility and aggression towards one another, the very antithesis of what community stood for to her.

*Melinda Green: Well, again, because my communities that I moderate on DearDiary I had a great deal of agency over, they also were a self-selected community with very clear, very strongly worded community guidelines that you had to agree with . . . And we actually wrestled with this, I co-moderate that group, the "Questioning Whiteness" [forum]. And the moderators, we all went back and forth and there was one guy who was pretending to be a Black woman but was actually a middle-aged White guy. Weird shit! You know? So we kept having to be like, "Let's amend this to say you can't pretend to be Black if you're not." You know? I can't believe we had to put that in the guidelines, but there you go! So when stuff would come up we would amend our documents. And we had resources, so if somebody was given a warning we had resources that they could go look at to understand why they fucked up and how to not do it again in the future. And the community, because it was a closed community, and most of the people there were on there for a very long time, there was a great deal of personal investment among the community members to ensure that stuff got nipped in the bud right away. Sometimes that made it worse. But generally if somebody said something that was out of line, a community member would say something and then contact one of us and say, "This happened, can you get rid of it or deal with this person . . ." So there just is so much more empowerment and*

*agency and self-selection. I mean people were there because they choose to be in a community that was actively about White people unlearning their racism. That's very specific. When you have any YouNews post about kittens, there is no self-selection, there's no investment in the community. They're just there to be shitty and say the N-word. And quote scripture at fags. You know? They don't have any personal investment in the tone being civil and a real conversation taking place. You see that a little less in places like Huffington Post, where there is some accountability. Where people's little avatar [is displayed], and you can see the comments they've made in other places . . . I think Shakespeare's Sister and Jezebel have an interesting self-moderating system. Again, but those are communities where people are rewarded for good behavior. And they are discouraged from bad behavior. And you know, you can vote down the trolls. There is nothing like that in something like YouNews. All you can do is flag something as abusive or say you disagree with it. Like, click.*

The outcome of her experiences doing CCM for YouNews left Melinda doubtful that the online generalist forums such as the ones it provided did anything positive for the advancement of dialogue or understanding among people. In fact, she believed it had the opposite effect and found the forums and other online spaces like it worse than useless; she found them damaging.

These experiences began to color her own engagement with other people, both online and off.

**Melinda Green:** . . . *I think [the job] contributed to a lot of my depression and isolation . . . But like in terms of like meeting new people and like assuming that they're not haters . . . I tend not to be as positive about people as I used to be since that. You know? And it's just, I have a much more heightened awareness when I walk around or when I meet friends of friends that they are probably thinking terrible things about me. If they knew my identities they would maybe smile and shake my hand and wish me burning in hell . . .*

Ultimately, Melinda questioned the utility of the existence of the generalist forums, and felt that

they would never be put to good use but, instead, would always attract an element of people who desired to engage in angry, profane postings. Melinda cited their existence as a generator of the negative content for which she was hired to police, echoing both Josh and Rick's insights.

***Melinda Green:** . . . I really don't think that 90% of people that go in to any online forum have any intention of having a conversation. They just don't. They want to barf out whatever it is they wanted to say. And just gleefully barf more when they're called on their shit . . . I would like to think that these people aren't like talking like that in the real world. Because if they are I hope there's someone running around after them with a bar of soap . . . But I know that's what a lot of people think and just feel comfortable saying in these forums. But I think that's how they really think. I think there's a lot of ugly people.*

Melinda's engagement with CCM in online news forums resulted in a difficult paradox: either allow people to speak freely in those spaces, leading to a site filled with invective and hateful speech, off-topic comments and useless content, or closely monitor and moderate such spaces, infringing on people's free expression but making the site usable for the majority of visitors. Clearly, Melinda erred on the side of the latter, but was frustrated by the propensity of the forums for which she performed CCM to invariably fall into the patterns of the former. In the end, Melinda's role for YouNews was one of brand protection and management, and her closing remarks to me underscored this perspective. She advocated the shuttering of such comment sites and forums on social media properties, presaging a large-scale move by numerous major online media properties such as Popular Science to do just that over the next few years.<sup>29</sup>

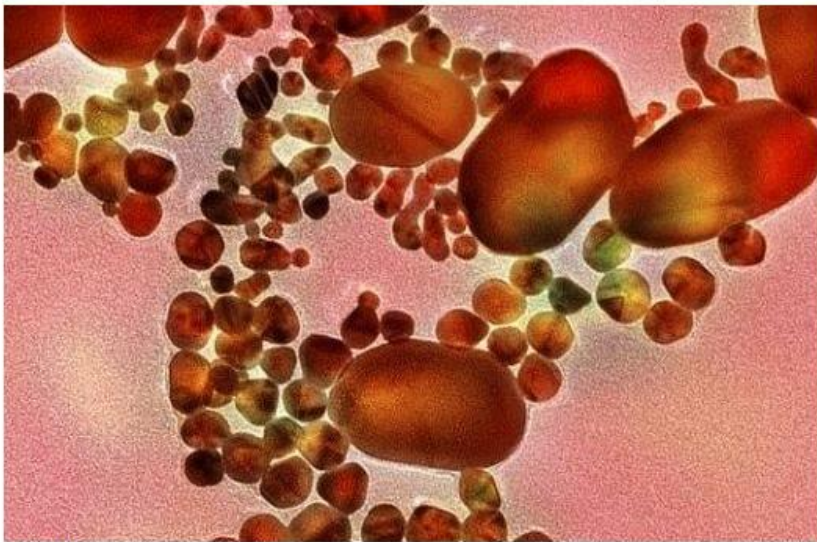
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<sup>29</sup> See <http://www.popsci.com/science/article/2013-09/why-were-shutting-our-comments>

## Why We're Shutting Off Our Comments

Starting today, PopularScience.com will no longer accept comments on new articles. Here's why.

By [Suzanne LaBarre](#) Posted 09.24.2013 at 8:15 am



Wellcome Images

Comments can be bad for science. That's why, here at PopularScience.com, we're shutting them off.

It wasn't a decision we made lightly. As the news arm of a 141-year-old science and technology magazine, we are as committed to fostering lively, intellectual debate as we are to spreading the word of science far and wide. The problem is when trolls and spambots overwhelm the former, **diminishing our ability** to do the latter.

**Figure 6.1:** Popular Science, the venerable and accessible science publication, announced its decision to eliminate online comments on its stories in late 2013: <http://www.popsci.com/science/article/2013-09/why-were-shutting-our-comments>.

Indeed, a recent University of Wisconsin study (also referenced in a *New York Times* article by the *Popular Science* webpage turning off comments) demonstrated that people exposed to negative comments responding to a news story were more likely to react negatively to the content of the news story itself (Anderson et al. 2014 [2013]; Brossard and Scheufele 2013).

Melinda put it simply:

***Melinda Green:** People are horrible! [laughter] No, um, I just in having this conversation with you, I'm coming back really strongly to, you know, if you have an Internet property and you don't have a very good reason for a forum – don't put it there. Cause it's, it's dangerous and it's ugly and it doesn't do anything for your brand. And it hurts people. So don't do it.*

## Chapter 7: Conclusion: Digital Humanity

*STR: You know, I've had conversations with people about my research and my interest in the topic and they say things . . . like, "Well, why don't you just go get one of those jobs and document what it's like?"*

*Max Breen: Don't put yourself through it.*

### The Future is Made of Digital Humanity

Recently, I sat outside in the spring sunshine on a bench, near a wooded area next to my building at the workplace where I labor. I had decided to take a break, which did not require that I ask approval, find coverage, sign off, or clock out. I simply walked out the door and sat down, absorbing the sunshine. I work as an Assistant Professor in a tenure-track academic job. I am at a research university, rich in financial and material resources to support my work. I live in a wealthy, industrialized country, Canada, where access to health care is a guaranteed right, even to a non-citizen like me. By and large, I make my own work hours. I pursue my own intellectual, creative interests and have the privilege of calling that my work. I spend several hours a week with people, young and old, who want to make a career of providing and insuring access to information and knowledge to other people, and whose enthusiasm and insights again and again enliven my own passion for our shared field. I go home to a house I inhabit alone, on a safe street, where I am warm, and comfortable.

I am living a life that many can only dream of. Often, I feel as though, I, too, must be dreaming. Not a day goes by where I do not count my blessings and feel thankful for this life that I am leading, on my own terms and undertaking work, for which I am fairly and relatively highly compensated, that makes me feel rewarded and as though I am making a contribution to the world at large. For much of my life, this was not the case, and so I can relate to and understand the people who toil in knowledge work and in the digital economy for relatively little pay and in obscurity, although my work never exposed me to the content that CCM workers contend with



constantly. I do not slight them by equating the relative ease and pleasure and joy of my former work life with theirs. I write about the work that they actually do. I know that I do not have the emotional strength or psychological fortitude to watch even one video or see one image of animal abuse, or child sexual assault, or the dead and dying and shattered bodies of a war zone. I could not bear to read messages that, over and over, called for my death. I could not do all of this in secret, and I could not go home at the end of the day and leave it all behind me, only to come back again for the next shift, and start in on the new queue. I could never do the work the CCM workers do, and, thankfully, it is unlikely that I will ever have to. I think about them often. I wonder how they are doing.

As I sat on the bench, I attempted to calculate the hours I had put into the research that this study represents. I tried to account for the time I spent reading texts that I have cited, for the hours I spent conducting interviews with the generous participants whose experiences I represent here, the minutes of conversations with friends and family about CCM that have inspired me and led me to think about CCM workers and practices in new ways. Eventually, I abandoned the calculations, as I became cognizant of the impossibility of determining how many hours, and days and months of my life the sum total must equal. And yet I will start off this conclusion with a statement of truth: the story of CCM, and the workers who undertake it is incomplete. In fact, it has only just begun.

The workers who volunteered of their time and personal experiences to help me fashion them into the meaning-making process we call “research” are, of course, only seven among a number I cannot count. There are the workers in rural Iowa, for example, with whom I was unable to engage. What are their stories? How are they contending with the issues that CCM work brings into their lives? How do they measure their contributions as they toil in cubicles and

click on computer interfaces during their shifts?

Then there are the legions of CCM workers dispersed across the globe. There are the workers in the call center and BPO capital of the world, the Philippines. My work here is incomplete, too, because the workers who informed this study are all from Western countries. They are educated with university degrees. They live in relative comfort, and make relatively good wages, compared to people in other parts of the world, doing CCM work. They speak English as a native language, and can capitalize on that skill in the context of their employment doing CCM. Most of the workers I spoke to cast a downward eye on CCM as performed elsewhere, in India or in the Philippines. Yet someone, somewhere must be soliciting workers to do just that, because the firms offering the service proliferate. Earlier this year, I worked with a graduate research assistant (whose labor I was able to afford, thanks to my startup research funds), to cull a list of call center firms in the Philippines offering CCM services to Western clients. We stopped the list at twenty-five.

There are the microlaborers, too, of the online work solicitation sites; the digital pieceworkers who connect, complete a CCM task, and disappear again after the labor transaction is complete. They are the most anonymous of all. Where are they in the world? Who are they? Do they leave their human traces behind, like the Google Book Scanners of Andrew Norman Wilson's short film do?<sup>30</sup> How can we apprehend their digital traces when the sign of a job well done is to leave none behind?

Finally, I recognize how my understanding of what goes on behind the screen has impacted my own engagement with social media and with all the digital platforms that make up my life, both in work and leisure. It is my hope that, in unveiling the presence of these previously

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<sup>30</sup> See Wilson's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/andandrewrew>

unknown intermediaries — whose CCM work is nevertheless a fundamental and indispensable task for their employers but also for all of us as users of the platforms for which they toil — we might ask who else exists behind the screen and behind the scenes, of the digital media ecology and landscape. I believe firmly that our own understanding of the breadth of human traces in this landscape is woefully limited, and that it therefore must be expanded if we are to truly be able to weigh the costs and benefits of our own escapism into digital platforms characterized by their fun, inviting, accessible and always-on affordances.

It is considered bad form, generally speaking, to leave readers with a list of rhetorical questions, and yet one important outcome for me, as a researcher, is to formulate these questions, such that they may guide my future research and be the many threads that I follow as I trace CCM and its workers around the globe, and in and out of the digital and physical spaces they inhabit. But here is another truth: we are all implicated — those of us, anyway, who log onto Facebook, upload to YouTube, comment on a news item, up-vote or down-vote a post. Our desire — our human desire — to feel engaged and connected has created the very niche that CCM workers fill, the need to which they respond. I often remember Josh Santos, as I think about this fact, who so acutely diagnosed the problem of suicidal ideation on MegaTech as one that was undoubtedly, incurably self-perpetuating. If they build it — the platforms, those empty vessels ready to fill up and rebrand and disseminate digitally around the globe — we will come. We will fill them — with our user-generated content, our preferences, our behaviors, our demographics, and our desires. We are often even more directly connected to CCM than that; after all, it is a user who flags a video that begins the CCM cycle of review at MegaTech. It is a user report on Facebook that sends a post or an image through the circuits depicted in the chart in Chapter 2. And it is user-generated content that is the subject of the reviews. Unless and until we

unplug, we, as users, are perhaps the most vital piece of all in the social media cycle of production. The CCM workers who make the platforms bearable, tolerable and fun are our unseen partners in this relationship of symbiosis, the yin to our yang, balancing and curating and working on making our pleasure and leisure feel pleasurable, and like leisure. Yet the up-votes, the flagging, the video sharing: our participation is an illusion of volition in an ever-shrinking, ever-compartmentalized series of enclosures, governed by EULAs, with human interventions hidden away by NDAs, and human traces erased as soon as they appear, anomalous errors, in the system. This study, small in the scheme of human things though it is, hopes to serve as a human trace, not so far removed from the finger on the book scan.

### **Out from Behind the Screen: CCM as Feature**

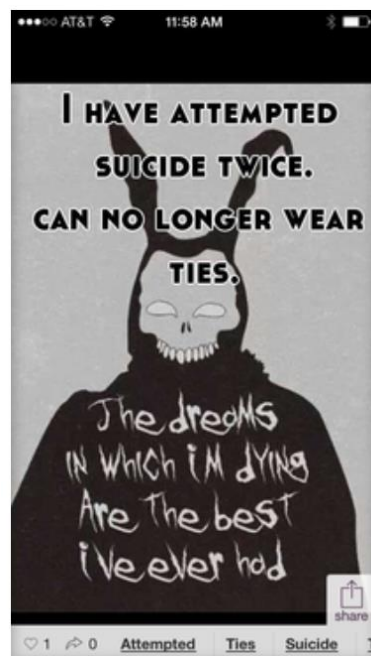
Whisper is a social media app made for iOS and Android smart devices, such as iPhones and Samsung Galaxy smartphones. It functions, essentially, as a mobile confessional, built on the twin premises of anonymity and curation. For the past few months, its CEO has been on a media blitz, appearing in trade publications and on tech-oriented radio programs and touting the app as the ultimate response to overly self-conscious social media interactions and profiles. It is a place where people can get real, yet without having to do so while connected to their name, work colleagues or pictures of someone else's newborn.

Of course, the anonymity of Whisper is not exactly that. While no one can see who is posting what from user to user, the ultimate personal data-tracking device, the smart phone, is the platform upon which Whisper sits. In addition, it is a certainty that the app has access to some type of user-entered personal data required for sign-up. And the curation of posts is another interesting aspect of its feature set:

On Whisper, your confession is posted to a public feed where strangers can see it, like it, and post a reply. Or, they can strike up

a conversation with you via private message. The app's popular feed exposes some of the top secrets on the service, a nearby stream highlights whispers posted around you, and a featured feed offers up content curated by the app's content moderators. (Van Grove 2014)

“A featured feed offers up content curated by the app’s content moderators.” On Whisper, not only is the presence of CCM workers — the “content moderators” described in the trade publication excerpt above — made overt, but their interventions take on a curatorial and taste-making role that is a main, advertised affordance of the app. They monitor all postings in real time, and even pull out those noteworthy, entertaining or controversial enough to draw Whisper users in. On Whisper, CCM is a feature, not a bug. The presence of the CCM staff is what differentiates Whisper as a platform upon which to spend time, and to which to contribute content. Unlike the vast majority of social media platforms, the CCM aspect of Whisper is considered a plus; if you are a Whisper user, you want to be noticed by the CCM staff.



**Figure 7.1:** A screenshot of the Whisper iOS interface featuring a suicide-related secret, coupled with imagery and lyrics referencing the film *Donnie Darko* and chosen by the CCM staff. (Van Grove 2014)

When I first heard about Whisper, and heard its CEO on the radio, discussing the platform's staff of 100 real-time moderators, it seemed like a step up and out of the shadows for CCM workers. I saw it as an opportunity for CCM to raise its profile, and perhaps earn its workers some respect. Yet Whisper and its business model are relatively new; it is relatively unproven as a platform and it remains to be seen how users will respond to this curatorial practice as undertaken by the CCM team.

Further, I learned from reporter Adrian Chen that these CCM workers, the linchpin in the differentiation model of Whisper from any other anonymous posting site on the Internet and in social media space, are located in a BPO call center in the Philippines.<sup>31</sup> Adrian went there in March of 2014 and watched them perform their job for an upcoming story on CCM in *Wired* magazine. In addition to the taste-making tasks that they performed, the Whisper CCM team, contractors all, also kept a tight rein on controlling the flow of UGC that violated law or platform guidelines. In sum, the CCM practices these workers were performing were essentially the same as those that this study's participants also undertook. The difference was that the platform made their presence known and, presumably, the app's users knew about them, too. If this looked any different, in practice, to the Filipino BPO call-center team contracted to perform CCM for Whisper, though, Chen did not notice it, although his visit to them did answer one question on the list I had generated. When I am asked who is enlisting the services of CCM staffers in the Philippines call center environments, I can now answer: "Whisper."

Is it possible for working conditions to improve for CCM workers? Until computational power and computer vision make exponential strides, it is a task that, for the foreseeable future, I believe demands human intervention. Even then, human labor, particularly as it follows

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<sup>31</sup> Personal conversation, Adrian Chen, 3/19/2014.

globalization circuits to sites of large and ever-cheaper labor pools, will likely still be preferred. The series of decisions that come into play that a CCM worker must make about each piece of UGC that he or she deals with is sophisticated beyond the scope of any algorithm or filter. The cultural nuances and linguistic specificities only add to the challenge. The human computer, the brain, and its massive data banks of cultural knowledge and life experience, coupled with the onboard meaning-making software, will still be preferable to any machine in terms of cost and capability. UGC-fueled social media platforms also do not show any signs of disappearing; the proliferation of more mobile computing devices and more people in the world having access to them suggests, indeed, the very opposite. Nor does it seem likely that human nature will change such that the jobs that Josh and Max and Melinda and people like them have done will just disappear. And so the need for CCM will continue. People willing to take on a job that provides little status, is often shrouded by contractual preclusions to even acknowledging its existence, exposes workers to abhorrent and disturbing aspects of humanity, and leads to almost assured burnout will still be needed.

I am thankful to the CCM workers for the job they do. I am grateful that it is not I who have to do it. Out of the shadows, out from behind the screen, and into the light.

—STR, 4/21/2014

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