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Aggregating the Unseen

- ***We reserve the right to refuse access to the Service to anyone for any reason at any time. We reserve the right to force forfeiture of any username for any reason.***

By any accounting, Instagram is a global social media phenomenon. It receives over 95 million photos and videos uploaded and shared per day, and has a total of 500 million users worldwide (over 80% of users coming from outside the United States¹) – all in less than six years of existence. Signaling its belief in Instagram’s potential for growth, in 2012, Facebook purchased Instagram for a combined cash and stock deal valued, at the time, at over one billion dollars US. This was an impressive amount, considering that Instagram had yet to formulate a means of revenue generation at the time of its acquisition. It has since developed a variety of mechanisms for revenue generation, including the location- and interested-based advertising that appears in users’ photostreams, based on the robust advertising capacity of Facebook and backed by that firm’s access to capital.

Instagram relies on its users possessing mobile smartphones (its desktop access is limited in functionality)². Users log aspects of their everyday life on Instagram, from “found” moments to the totally constructed. Celebrities (Beyoncé; Lena Dunham, assorted Kardashians, e.g.) populate the platform with intimate(?) shots of their personal lives, while the platform itself has spawned celebrities of its own or propelled their individual brands to greater heights. Others have explored the limits of the platform as a space for art, self-expression, or as a means to connect with others through a shared aesthetic or shared interests.

Instagram’s content frequently blurs the line between spontaneous and staged, and the focus is often less on any particular sense of authenticity than it is on providing aspirational fodder for users. In any case, Instagram relies on the willingness of its usersbase to continually, relentlessly upload new photos and videos that, in turn, keep users coming back to refresh and scroll through their photostream.

- ***We may, but have no obligation to, remove, edit, block, and/or monitor Content or accounts containing Content that we determine in our sole discretion violates these Terms of Use.***

As with virtually all mainstream social media platforms and applications, user-generated content on Instagram is governed and disciplined via a set of platform-defined rules it

¹ <https://www.instagram.com/press/?hl=en>

² According to Pew, in 2015, “Nearly two-thirds of Americans are now smartphone owners, and for many these devices are a key entry point to the online world.” <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/01/us-smartphone-use-in-2015/>

colloquially refers to as its “community guidelines.” These rules govern user engagement on Instagram, which reserves the right to enforce them as it sees fit and according to its own opaque interpretation. A perusal of Instagram’s community guidelines website (<https://help.instagram.com/477434105621119/>) reveals what the platform attracts and struggles to control: pictures and videos of self-harm and self-injury, images glorifying eating disorders, images of exploitation and underage children using the platform.

In order to manage rules violations and subsequent takedowns, Instagram and platforms like it rely on a worldwide legion of commercial content moderation (CCM) workers who screen images, typically after they have been reported by other users as being in violation of the Instagram Community Guidelines. CCM workers must be arbiters of taste and social norms, applying their own sensibilities to and through those of the platform, making decisions about what material to remove and what to leave up. It is a task that demands precision of the human mind – at present, no computer can replicate the human capacity for CCM work - yet is often given only a few seconds to complete, making it frequently stressfully high-paced and extremely rote at the same time. My own academic research has focused on these CCM workers, whose repeated exposure to user uploads deemed too awful to be left standing on mainstream platforms like Instagram frequently takes a toll on them in their work and private lives. From the platform’s perspective, CCM labor is essential, yet it is frequently outsourced and subcontracted, and remunerated poorly.

The hidden processes by which the labor of CCM is undertaken contribute to the notion of social media, and all its attendant parts, as immaterial and ethereal, rather than grounded in the physical word and reliant upon human actors. CCM’s invisibility enhances the myth that what ends up on a site is there by purposeful design of artificial intelligence and algorithmic computation, rather than by human decision-making and, often, dumb luck. Social media firms take advantage of the ability to offshore this labor en masse to sites in the global South, thus distancing themselves, metaphorically and geographically, from the everyday working conditions of CCM workers, as well as blanketing those workers in non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) that preclude them from speaking about their work and experiences. It introduces a plausible deniability for social media platforms, who can focus on the fun and more glamorous aspects of product innovation at their Silicon Valley headquarters, while leaving the task of cleanup, and the risks of exposure to it, a problem mostly for people on the other side of the world.

- ***You may not post violent, nude, partially nude, discriminatory, unlawful, infringing, hateful, pornographic or sexually suggestive photos or other content via the Service.***

From a user perspective, for those who push the envelope on the platform’s tolerance for imagery and video depictions that straddle mainstream tastes, norms, politics and safety, the experience of having an image deleted is a frustrating one. When a photo is removed, the Instagram user to whom it belongs has virtually no mechanism, beyond the broadly drafted Guidelines, to understand who complained about it or why – and no mechanism for any

significant appeal. Some Instagram users have responded by reposting the same deleted image over and over again, drawing the attention of others to their cause, or resulting in their banning from the platform. In some cases, these acts (or actions) have fomented policy change, such as the relaxing of Instagram’s outright ban on breastfeeding or on the presence of menstrual blood. Increasingly the frustration is the fact that such policies are not enforced, or relaxed, equally – a problem that becomes more understandable once one realizes that human beings are largely responsible for the adjudication process.

• ***Post photos and videos that are appropriate for a diverse audience. We know that there are times when people might want to share nude images that are artistic or creative in nature, but for a variety of reasons, we don’t allow nudity on Instagram. This includes photos, videos, and some digitally-created content that show sexual intercourse, genitals, and close-ups of fully-nude buttocks. It also includes some photos of female nipples, but photos of post-mastectomy scarring and women actively breastfeeding are allowed. Nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is OK, too.***

When subjects include images of the female body (in a variety of stages of dress and nudity), people of size, people of color, people who are gender-variant and those who otherwise find themselves occupying the margins of social space, takedowns seem to be part of the negotiated cost of using Instagram for such (self-)expression. When marginalized identity markers serve as deletion fodder, the effects of takedowns are rendered even more personal. It is a tradeoff that underscores the very nature of Instagram itself, which is not a gallery, not a living room, not a shared private space among friends – despite masquerading as such.

Instagram (and other social media platforms like it, such as its parent company, Facebook) exist in a nuanced and liminal space, deliberately straddling and even blurring lines between public and private, leisure and labor, fun and frustrating – even frightening. For-profit companies, they fill a void that exists in the shrinking or outright absence of public space and the loss of institutions in the public sphere, and proliferate even as institutions that have also occupied similar liminal positions but with more overt responsibility to the public, such as newspapers and print media, struggle for survival. The immediacy and sheer capacity to connect is alluring and overrides concerns, for many, about privacy and the potential loss of control over their self-expression (relegated simply to “Content” in the Community Guidelines).

The aggregated deleted images gesture at the politics of Instagram and, by abstraction, at those of a multitude of mainstream social media platforms. The labor of the images’ production and the emotional and technical management of the constant omnipresent threat or actual act of takedown is also implicit in this collection. Media scholar Magda Olszanowski cleverly refers to such management labor as “sensorship,”³ a practice she describes as inherently feminist, as well as feminized. Likewise, CCM workers and their labor are represented inherently in this collection, as well, this acknowledgement a perhaps unintended but altogether powerful by-product of the grouping together of these images.

³ Olszanowski, Magdalena. "Feminist self-imaging and instagram: Tactics of circumventing sensorship." *Visual communication quarterly* 21, no. 2 (2014): 83-95. DOI: 10.1080/15551393.2014.928154

The experience of engagement with Instagram is isolating and individual where takedown is concerned, despite the platform's self-styling as a site of community and collectivity. To be sure, the invisible interventions of CCM workers are hardly showcased and seldom acknowledged by platforms who rely upon them, making what artists Arvida Byström and Molly Soda offer in this volume all the more compelling. It is an aggregation of the unseen, and a uniting of individually deleted images into a collection, yielding an attempt, at least, of a sense-making project among the photos and videos that have been brought together with their shared characteristic of absence. As someone concerned with the *process* of deletion and removal of user-generated content on social media platforms, to see the material results of that process represented in this way is fascinating.

Of course, the works here do not necessarily represent the totality of imagery that is subject to Instagram deletion. Instead, the editors offer a curated, compelling and even confrontational glimpse at what one subset of users – their motives largely unknown and unknowable – has attempted to disseminate. Some images will likely shock or even repulse the readers of this book. Others will provoke befuddlement as to what could have been the cause of their removal, such as why a nipple is sexual, or why sexuality is inherently bad, dangerous or to be hidden, or why a Black woman wearing hijab is inherently problematic on Instagram. In each case, it is because these representations are those deemed dangerous and threatening in everyday life – witness the tenor and rhetoric of the 2016 American Presidential race, as one such demonstration of the demonization of entire classes of racial, sexual and gender identities. What this collection of redacted images does, ultimately and fundamentally, is to link these private absences and unremarked-upon removals to much larger political questions about representation of (among other things) race, gender, sexuality and the politics of acceptability in society in our contemporary moment. To render visible these deleted personal, expressive moments is to question the norms by which such images are removed in the first place, and to reflect upon the power and politics behind such decision-making.

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