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LOCALIZED VOLUNTEER MODERATION AND ITS DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION

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The social media industry has begun more prominently positioning itself as a vehicle for tapping into local community. Facebook offers hundreds of region-specific community groups, proudly touting these in nation-wide commercials (Facebook, 2020). Reddit has hundreds of subreddits focused on specific states, cities, and towns. And Nextdoor encourages users to sign up and “Get the most out of your neighborhood.” In these locally oriented digital spaces, users interact, discuss community issues, and share information about what is happening around them. Volunteer moderators with localized knowledge are important agents in the creation, maintenance, and upkeep of these digital spaces. And, as we show, Facebook, Reddit, and Nextdoor create strategic communication to guide this localized volunteer moderator labor to realize specific goals within these spaces.

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As the fabric of local community changes to incorporate these digital groups, it is important to critically interrogate how platforms position themselves through their discourse in relation to local communities and the volunteer moderators that shape these spaces. In this work, we ask: “What are the promises the social media industry make about local community groups, and how do they position volunteer moderators to help realize those promises?” Gillespie (2010) observes that social media companies are careful in how they position “themselves to users, clients, advertisers, and policymakers, making strategic claims as to what they do and do not do, and how their place in the information landscape should be understood” (para. 1). We extend Gillespie’s logic to trace how the social media industry’s discourse contributes to public beliefs about what local community groups are, how they should be used and maintained, their place in civic life, and the role of local volunteer moderators within them.

We engage in a qualitative content analysis of 849 documents relating to moderation created by Facebook, Reddit, and Nextdoor (400 from Facebook, 184 from Reddit, and 265 from Nextdoor) generated by the companies between 2017 and 2023. These documents address local communities, volunteer moderation, or the role platforms play in civic life. We find the companies each project a vision of what platform-mediated local communities look like. Further, we find this discourse simultaneously helps sustain and orient a volunteer moderator workforce that performs a degree of labor sometimes equivalent to a full-time job, in part by motivating people not with money but virtue.

Through our analysis, we illustrate how each platform constructs a utopian vision of local community. Each utopia varies according to their underlying ethos and ideological approaches to governance. Facebook emphasizes diverse connections, bringing the world closer together (one locality at a time), and communities that are constructive. Nextdoor emphasizes kindness, inclusivity and belonging, and meaningful connections between neighbors. Reddit emphasizes a bottom-up view of community akin to a liberal democracy where free expression pairs with tolerance of multiple points of view. Each of the platform then situates volunteer moderators in their vision as a mechanism for the utopia’s realization. To properly guide volunteer moderators, the platforms construct discourse that encourages forms of “proactive” moderation, “reactive” moderation, careful record keeping, growth, and the avoidance of volunteer moderator burnout.

Platforms’ projection of these utopian imaginaries is important to their success. Certainly, they help attract users. Who wouldn’t want to be in a space that is welcoming, inclusive, and enriches one’s community? However, this utopian rhetoric is also key for recruiting the volunteer moderators themselves. Volunteer moderators are a critical source of (free) labor for these companies, worth millions of dollars (Li et al., 2022). To sustain a voluntary workforce performing a degree of labor sometimes equivalent to a full-time job, the companies must motivate people not with money but with civic virtue. Volunteer moderators are told they must value the work as a means of altruistically “making a difference” in their community, similar to values-driven, other-oriented offline volunteerism.

We find that platforms also appeal to egoistic motivation (Wilson & Son, 2018) by positioning volunteer moderators as leaders in their communities. In doing so, they

encourage volunteer moderators to create content themselves and, in turn, guide other users in creating content within the boundaries of the platform's rules. By generating and sustaining engagement on the platforms, volunteer moderators become an incredibly important source of labor and value-generation for the companies, against which they can sell advertisements and further expand their user bases (see: Smythe, 2001; Fuchs, 2015; Terranova, 2000). By channeling the free labor or volunteer moderators to build a "kind" (or, perhaps \$KIND—Nextdoor's stock ticker symbol) network that functions as a simulacra of a utopian local community, encouraging growth and the recruitment of additional new free labor/volunteer moderators, the companies can derive value from the intrinsic network effects of these spaces.

The platforms' discourses also orient volunteer moderators to performing another kind of labor: that of reputation management and accountability buffering for the platforms. For example, in response to criticisms about racism on the platform (Holder & Akinnibi, 2022), Nextdoor began much more proactively emphasizing the removal of hate-speech and the promotion of inclusivity in its communications about moderation. In response to their own controversies, Facebook and Reddit both began highlighted stories featuring volunteer moderators performing Good Samaritan acts that position the platforms as productive of more compassionate, cooperative communities.

Volunteer moderators are the frontlines of realizing these initiatives. When new (or old) social problems emerge, the social media industry can turn volunteer moderators towards addressing the problem without substantial new investments in labor. And, if users or other external stakeholders perceive a persisting failure to effectively resolve the problem, volunteer moderators act as buffers, putting distance between the companies and the on-the-ground decision making, as the companies have "empowered" their non-employees to deal with the problem. In this sense, we find local volunteer moderators serve as a convenient fire-shield, as part of a broader networked platform governance (Caplan, 2023). And, the companies can take credit for volunteer moderators' successes in cultivating welcoming spaces while evading blame for problems.

While Facebook, Nextdoor, and Reddit occasionally mention the importance of offline local expertise, the reality is that many volunteer moderators fall into the role as a result of either self-selection or active participation in their online community. Our analysis reflects extensive discussion of what moderators should and should not do, suggesting a perceived understanding of volunteer moderators as leaders-in-training rather than already-made leaders. Optimistically, the difference between the ascendancy of leaders offline and within the platforms' digital spaces could represent an opportunity for true grassroots governance of communities, as volunteer moderators face fewer institutional barriers to attaining their position. Alternately, volunteer moderators might be seen as those receptive to or unquestioning of platforms' articulated definitions of good leadership, which serve the social media industry's needs and interests first and foremost.

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