



# Default publicness: Queer youth of color, social media, and being outed by the machine

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## Abstract

This article finds that US queer youth of color prefer Tumblr to express intimate feelings and personal politics over other social media such as Facebook. It is based on 5 years of cyberethnographic research in queer Tumblr circulations as well as multi-year rounds of qualitative interviewing with queer youth informants. Several informants experienced drastically negative consequences, to the point of being disowned by their families, because of what this article calls a design bias toward “default publicness” that shapes user experience on social media such as Facebook. This article identifies four design decisions that create “default publicness” on social media platforms, viewing these decisions through queer, feminist, and critical race theories that have argued that the “public” is never neutral terrain. It understands these design decisions as imperatives of “platform capitalism,” which extracts robust and verifiable user data for monetization, and structures these spaces accordingly.

## Keywords

Facebook, LGBTQ, platform capitalism, privacy, queer, social media, Tumblr, Twitter, user experience, youth

I always marvel at the ways in which nonwhite children survive a white supremacist U.S. culture that preys on them. I am equally in awe of the ways in which queer children navigate a homophobic public sphere that would rather they did not exist. The survival of children who are both queerly and racially identified is nothing short of staggering.

Muñoz (1999: 37)

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Where do you go when the world is tilted against you? How do you express yourself when the act of expressing—speech, desire, the smallest hand gesture—is itself a grave bodily liability policed out of the corner of a stranger’s eye, by hostile peers, or even by the actual police?

For the queer young people in the United States (both white and of color), I spoke and interacted with from 2009 to 2015, one answer was Tumblr. This may be a surprise for non-queer-identified folks; for the rest of us, it is not a surprise at all. Tumblr is queer (What you need to know about Tumblr, 2010). Tumblr is a home for sexual and gender spectra, including asexual and trans folks (Dame, 2016; Fink and Miller, 2014; Renninger, 2014). Tumblr has a queer temporal-affective mechanics (Cho, 2015). Tumblr is disproportionately favored by queer youth, with 64% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex+ (LGBTQI+) Australian youth social media users in one survey saying they use it compared with 14% of general youth in a comparable survey in the United States (Robards and Byron, 2017).

Through the testimony of young queer-of-color users of Tumblr as well as formal analysis of the Tumblr space via participant observation over the 5 years of my own cyberethnographic immersion in queer Tumblr circulations, this essay asserts that one reason why the queer youth I have interacted with are so invested in Tumblr as opposed to other social media is that it offers a digital venue for expression and connection that is structured in a way that evades what boyd (2010a) has critiqued as the “public by default setting” of other social media platforms. “Default publicness” also builds on Baym and boyd’s (2012) concept of “socially mediated publicness”: in a long history of co-constituency of media and the formation of “the public,” social media afford yet another set of rearticulations. “The interactivity and bi-directionality of social media” (Baym and boyd, 2012: 322) beg interrogation of the structural and social components of this “publicness” as architected through social media circulations.

This essay’s critique of default publicness in social media spaces uses a queer skepticism of the “public” to nuance ongoing debates about “privacy” online; default publicness is not, for example, the simple instantiation of a social media post available for everyone online to see absent a log-in. It is, rather, a design stance, an orientation and a “belief” built in (Stanfill, 2015) to the architecture of social media spaces such as Facebook that structures a user’s experience in service of a steroidal version of publicity: hyper-privileging extant offline networks, hewing strictly to state-validated identity, making the communication archive as readable and traversable as possible, and even broadcasting one’s actions to one’s networks without one’s knowledge. A design bias toward default publicness presumes that being-in-public carries little to no risk, that all bodies are legislated by state and social/informal policing equally, ignoring that, at least in the United States, the state of publicness is thickly encrusted with centuries of policy, violence, and cultural mores that conspire to allow white heteromascularity, at the expense of all other embodied inhabitations, the ability to relax and express in public.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, a design bias toward default publicness on social network sites is a prerequisite for the successful extractive operation of late capital via what recent observers have termed “platform capitalism” (Lobo, 2014; Srnicek, 2016). This includes the ability to charge monopoly rents to advertisers based on a massive yet hyper-targetable user dataset made robust by the users themselves through user-donated content, attitudes, emotions, and

demographics (Langley and Leyshon, 2016), and comprehensible through algorithmic analytics. That default publicness is a design schema entirely aligned toward expediting the flows of capital through platforms as profitably as possible *and also* rehearses a long history of raced and sexualized normative assumptions of who and what kind of behavior is assumed in public, ignoring the life-threatening concerns of marginalized users through an array of design decisions that are assumptive of the publicness of White heteronormativity—the globally preeminent public vehicle for capital for centuries—is not a coincidence.

The default publicness of social media platforms such as Facebook has resulted in drastically negative, life-altering consequences for some queer youth of color I have interviewed. Tumblr, in contrast, in part because of a different set of design decisions, intertwined with historically lenient administrative policies, is a digital space where queer youth of color do not feel the pressure of constant homophobic and racist surveillance from pre-existing (or future) life networks. It evades indexing; it privileges affective and evocative exchange of imagery and the cultivation of a sensibility rather than giving primacy to literal interaction (though it allows for that too); it did not for most of its history allow for one-to-one direct messaging between users; it does not assume or require connections to extant offline networks and does not insist on a singular, permanent, “authentic” user identity; it is seemingly OK with porn and flouts copyright, among other interrelated design and policy choices.

This essay interfaces with a growing body of literature that pays attention to how the design properties of digital platforms do in fact help shape and afford certain genres of use while at the same time does not relinquish critical media studies’ long-held suspicion of technological determinism and its staunch position against the evacuation of social context when talking about uses of technology (Davis and Chouinard, 2017; Massanari, 2015; Nakamura, 2007). It follows Litt’s (2012) entreaty to think critically about how the “imagined audience” of a user’s self-performance on social media is constructed and pushes this farther, asserting that some social media platforms *themselves* contain a heteronormative understanding of user and audience built into their design.

In addition to my own background experiences interacting with hundreds of queer Tumblr users for 5 years as an immersed participant-observer, I formally engaged 11 young queer people, ranging from 18 to 25, in multiple rounds of semi-structured qualitative interviewing regarding their experiences on Tumblr as well as other social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Some of these informants only completed two interviews and dropped away; others I kept in touch with for almost the entire 5 years with recurring interviews, Tumblr interactions, and text message exchanges, witnessing major life changes such as the transition from high school to college. These informants were recruited through snowball sampling in online queer-of-color Tumblr circulations (of which I was a part) as well as offline recruitment through a university in Texas. Nothing in this essay is quoted without my informants’ consent, and this study was approved by my home institution’s Institutional Review Board.

Although this essay is aligned with a plethora of work about “privacy” online (boyd [2006], Raynes-Goldie [2010], Trepte and Reinecke [2011], and Vitak [2012] are touch points), it purposefully avoids relying on this term. Instead, it orients its critical attention toward the shape of “publicness” on social media such as Facebook or Twitter in order to question their hegemonic, or “common sense” (Gramsci, 1971), assumptive modes of

participation and unpack the normativities they conceal. In perhaps its simplest definition, Humphreys explains, paraphrasing Westin (2003), “Privacy has been defined as the ability to control what information about oneself is available to others” (Humphreys, 2011: 576). This is the core of my informants’ concern about what to share on social media. However, “networked publics” (Ito, 2008) such as social media vastly complicate this definition; Marwick and boyd (2014) suggest that we need to think of privacy not through the frame of the individual, but through the frame of the network. This essay zooms the critical apparatus out even farther, flipping the script on “privacy” to also critically ask what is assumed or permitted as “public” in networked publics, how the design choices that structure networked publics carry baked-in cultural normativities about publicity, and, ultimately, how this default toward publicness is fundamentally in service of the circulation of capital. It cautions that work on privacy that does not also critically interrogate how the “public” in question is structured already risks rehearsing a hegemonic gaze that assumes that the public is neutral terrain and the private needs to be even further legislated.

This essay is an attempt at gaze-shifting, away from a microscopic obsession with the idiosyncratic particularities of our privates only, and finds kinship in work by feminist, queer, and of-color foremothers (Anzaldúa, 1987; Davis, 1981; Sedgwick, 1990), as well as newer work in surveillance studies (Lyon, 1994; Mann et al., 2002) that interrogates how the architecture of publicness itself is shaped through power. Analyzed intersectionally (Crenshaw, 1991), this public power-in-seeing has, in the United States, historically normalized whiteness and heterosexuality (Eng, 2010). Or as Browne (2015) explains, “Where public spaces are shaped for and by whiteness, some acts in public are abnormalized by way of racializing surveillance” (p. 17), or when Fiske (1998) states, “Today’s seeing eye is white,” (p. 69), this is something my informants know first-hand. This essay cites queer youth of color experiences on social media to indict the standpoint of the obsessor, himself, as it is engineered into social media spaces.

## What is Tumblr?

I first became aware of Tumblr through a combination of things in 2008: discovery of a seemingly unending supply of gay porn on the platform, as well as offline friends who began sharing links of funny queer Internet image-based ephemera from who-knows-where, aggregated on Tumblr. Here is a sample scroll through my feed, as recorded in my notes in 2014:

*A post with the text “Gay conservative/republican” and a response GIF animation posted underneath it. It’s RuPaul’s Drag Race star Alyssa Edwards, in full makeup and curly blonde wig, mouthing the dialogue, written on the bottom of the image: “What the fuck is that? I feel like you just made that up.”*

*A post written by a user I follow that is an entreaty to sign up for Amazon Student because it can save you money.*

*An animated GIF of a male porn star fellating another male porn star, stopping, and smiling at his partner.*

*An animated GIF of two of the young female characters from American Horror Story: Coven, walking toward the camera side-by-side. They are owning it.*

*A photo collage of Jeffrey Dahmer and a young victim, 14-year-old Konerak Sinthasomphone. There is a lot of explanatory text—apparently, two officers found the young boy stumbling down the road and “returned” him to Dahmer, who subsequently murdered him. The officers were dismissed but eventually awarded \$55,000 in back pay. There are numerous links to more information. The most recent poster says: “I went to read further and it didn’t get any better.”*

This is how Tumblr is experienced—through curation, aggregation, and cultivation via a constant, mostly non-text-based flow of posts from people you follow. Launched in 2007 as a short-format blog (or “micro-blog”) site, Tumblr works through a combination of following and “reblogging.”<sup>2</sup> This manifests in the “dashboard,” which displays the latest posts from all the Tumblr users that you follow. When you come across a post on your dashboard, you can decide to “like” the post or “reblog” it. When you do, the post gets posted on your own Tumblr, and is now visible to anyone who follows you. After lurking and playing around with its features, I decided that the best way for me to try to understand what was going on—this seemingly never-ending nexus of queer content, emotion, erotics, politics, and testimony—was to fully immerse myself, creating my own Tumblrs, beginning in 2009. As my research plan formalized and I began to chat with users, both online and off, one theme that kept surfacing was how wildly different the forms of expression I was seeing from queer folk on Tumblr were versus other social media. This was something I made sure to ask all my queer youth informants—why did they like Tumblr? What, really, was so different about it? What made them feel OK to share in this way?

## **Being outed by the machine, and the comfort of seclusion**

Across the board, the queer youth of color I talked to viewed Facebook as a dangerous space. They were also not heavy Twitter users for similar reasons, though they perceived it as less dangerous than Facebook. Tumblr, in contrast, was a space where they could let loose, express more intimate and deep emotions, did not feel the pressure of constant surveillance, and could learn a lot about how to make sense of the world around them and its various antagonisms, including a sophisticated vocabulary regarding race, gender, and sexuality politics. At least two of my informants were disowned by their families to some degree because they were outed by the machine of Facebook, as it were. This is due to its structural bias toward default publicness, in which design decisions urge users into a heteronormative assumptive posture of public expression.

On a cloudy, muggy day in early 2015, Dev<sup>3</sup> and I were having coffee on a patio in Austin, Texas. He identifies as a multiracial Black, Native American, and White gay man. At the time, he was 19 years old. His outing happened his first semester at college. He is from a very conservative, very religious town in west Texas. He is still unsure of how his family found out he is gay, but he suspects it was through a chain of family or family-friend surveillance that started with Facebook. He took a lot of precautions, and still someone—or something—leaked it.

His attempted workarounds of Facebook's default publicness were striking. When he was in high school, he established a Facebook profile over which his mother demanded strict supervision. As he and I were talking, he called it a "fake" profile—not because he was using a fake name, but because he knew he couldn't express his identity truthfully, including his sexual orientation and personal politics, for fear of the extreme social surveillance in the space. Then, unbeknownst to his mother, when he moved away to college, he set up a second Facebook account, in which he used a slightly altered name ("Dev," instead of Devon, which he refuses to use at all anymore because it reminds him of home). He was careful to use this account only for the new friends he made at college. On *this* Facebook account, he was comfortably out, he posted musings about the queer politics of his favorite animated characters from *Justice League*, politics, and LGBTQ issues, as well as other interests such as metal music. He also used it whenever his classes demanded he use Facebook, or to RSVP for queer student group events. He was careful to navigate the platform's default publicness, making sure his parallel Facebook worlds didn't overlap, but somehow they did. When he went home for a birthday celebration his first semester of college, his mother confronted him about his sexuality. He admitted to me that they haven't treated him the same since; his mother has cooled to him, and his father simply doesn't know how to deal with his son's gay identity. They are scared, he told me. They don't want him to go to hell.

Rachel, a 20-year-old queer Mexican American college student from San Antonio, heavily negotiates what she reveals online. She has high stakes—her mom recently cut her off completely, financially, when I first spoke with her. Although she hadn't officially come out to her family, she suspected it was because she was living with her girlfriend, and she suspected Facebook had something to do with the reveal. To top it off, they recently went through a bad breakup, leaving Rachel having to find a place to live and figure out how to support herself. She said she got loans from her college and a job to support herself on her own going forward.

When I asked Rachel in 2015 how she felt about Tumblr as opposed to Facebook, I asked her to describe each platform in a few words. She said Facebook was "superficial" in terms of the kinds of things one could post; Tumblr was "an outlet" and "more personal," a place to "express myself." She used Facebook to keep up to date on the organizations that she belonged to, such as her school's queer of color group, but she didn't actually signify that she would ever attend their events because if she "joined" them, that action would show up on other peoples' news feeds—another iteration of default publicness. "On Facebook I have more family," she said to me. "I'm not out on Facebook—there are too many people I know on Facebook."

In contrast, Tumblr was a space of things-in-common with little at stake for Rachel. She described Tumblr as a "space of comfort" where "nobody knows you," where "you're not as exposed [as Facebook]." On Tumblr, she expressed her feelings, her thoughts on her breakup, her current mood—she expressed herself, generally, with far less of an internal censor than on Facebook. Although she told me that she did indeed know many people on Tumblr from her real-life friend circle, it was a highly curated group of friends with whom she felt comfortable sharing her deeper personal feelings. She was not a heavy Twitter user.

Adam, whom I spoke with from 2014 to 2015, from the Houston area, identifies as Mexican American and bisexual. He was not out to his extended family, many of whom are “friends” on Facebook and Twitter. Accordingly, he negotiated what he posted on Facebook and Twitter, while he felt much more free to express his inner feelings and personal or even erotic politics on Tumblr. He said, in an interview with me in 2015, at age 21,

I usually go on there when I’m frustrated or angry, or want to vent. It’s always about queer things. Just like anger towards white supremacy and Grindr or something. Or like being rejected by somebody or being led on by somebody and them rejecting me. Something silly.

I suspect that Adam was trying to minimize the sting of rejection since it is gutturally stunning how much White supremacy is baked into our hierarchies of desire (McBride, 2005; Rafalow et al., 2017). I knew the feeling, I told him:

When I asked Adam to describe Tumblr to me, one word he kept using was “secluded”:

I know that it’s a very secluded environment I guess. Like, all of my other social media platforms, like Instagram and Twitter, I have a lot of followers, or a lot of connections—particularly a lot of family members too.

“Secluded” was interesting to me, as well as Rachel’s use of the phrases “not as exposed,” and “nobody knows you”—especially since, like Rachel, Adam also knew some of his Tumblr intimates from offline friend networks. Clearly, people did “know” them. When I asked Adam, he explained that this was a carefully curated group of people with whom he knew he shared a left politics, those who would support him when he felt vulnerable, those who got his erotics and were not offended by them, those who sympathized with his frustrations. Both Adam and Rachel explained to me that these were small groups of offline friends whom they allowed to peek into their Tumblr worlds—a reciprocal act of trust, in direct contrast to the treacherous default publicness of other social media.

Tumblr’s design away from default publicness also allows for the vibrant circulation of counter-hegemonic cultural comment. I learned a lot about this from Ixchel, with whom I spoke in early 2015. Thankfully, she was not in danger of being cut-off or uncomfortably navigating hostile family members because her parents are accepting and encouraging of her sexual identity. She was 18 years old at the time and identified as Chinese Mexican American. She identified as pansexual and also demisexual (I had to ask her what this meant), and told me she has questioned her gender all her life. She had a worldly quality about her, beyond her years. When we spoke, she was excited about the animated TV shows *Steven Universe* (Steven, who is already half gem, fuses temporarily with Connie, becoming a non-gender-binary quarter-gem entity named Steveonnie who refuses to be genderboxed, she explained to me), and *The Legend of Korra* (Korra, the headstrong heroine, courted by male characters throughout the show’s four seasons, winds up with a girlfriend in the end). She interfaced with these fandoms through Tumblr.

She possessed a vocabulary about race and gender issues that extended beyond mine. When I asked her where she learned all of this, she explained that it was mostly from following trans bloggers on Tumblr, as well as bloggers who talk about race theory. She

explained, “I got the basic terms from my mom. I was trying to figure out more about myself, and there were personal blogs [on Tumblr] by people who were trans. They knew a lot about gender theory.” I asked her whether she had learned more on Tumblr or more from her professors about gender and queer theory. Without hesitation, she said, “Students have better knowledge than professors.”

## The structures underneath default publicness

I want to be clear that the claim I am making is not that queer youth of color alone rely on different digital spaces to express in different ways. What I am claiming is that queer youth of color have *very high stakes* in navigating the degree of publicness of the types of things that they choose to express and the way they express them in these different digital spaces, that they have developed revealing strategies and viewpoints regarding this constant negotiation, and, furthermore, that certain digital spaces such as Facebook are designed in a way that defaults toward a general publicity. This design bias includes baked-in normativities that rehearse a standpoint that being-in-public is somehow neutral, low-risk, unracial, ungendered, and unsexed.

Queer people have a lot to say about who and what is permitted in public. Warner (2002) has described this relationship to publicness as a “counterpublic” orientation and discourse; Berlant and Warner (1998) have explicated how being-in-public already presupposes a set of heteronormative sexual alignments; Gray (2009) has identified the creation of ephemeral, ad-hoc “boundary publics” in her study of rural queer US youth. The idea is that “public” is never neutral, is in fact highly scaffolded terrain, demanding a strict set of normative performances and embodiments in terms of sexuality (and race, and gender, and ability) that conveniently ally with capital and empire (Puar, 2007; Sedgwick, 1993). Additionally, even when publicly sanctioned understandings of “LGBT” in a US context do emerge, they are usually raced to be default White (Ferguson, 2004; Johnson, 2005; McBride, 2005). This critique of the tilt of the public sphere is also not new to feminist or cultural studies (Fraser, 1990; Hall et al., 2013). Because of these non-neutral public dynamics, including a very real fear of bodily harm and social stigma, queer people have used the Internet to forge connection beyond the boundaries of the closet since its earliest days (Alexander, 2002; Campbell, 2004; Egan, 2000).

What we are seeing in Dev’s and Rachel’s stories is the occurrence and aftermath of what has been called “context collapse,” or even “context collision” in “networked publics,” in this case, social media spaces (boyd, 2010b; Marwick and boyd, 2011). A context collapse or collision happens in networked publics when different contexts of peoples’ social lives—let’s say “work” and “family,” spheres that are normally kept relatively separate in traditional offline social negotiations—start to bleed together.

The argument embedded in my critique of default publicness interrogates design decisions that enable context collapse to happen in the first place, as well as zooms out to make strange the idea of the “public” itself in the “networked public” formation, indicting a set of hegemonic cultural suppositions baked into the design of these spaces. Renninger (2014) has performed a generative analysis of Tumblr affordances, which I build upon here, comparatively. By analyzing the component affordances of networked

publics such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr as viewed through the lens of my informants' testimony, it is possible to "read" the design choices that formally structure interaction for their assumptive uses—and the potentially dire consequences for users. This approach is indebted to Stanfill's (2015) "discursive interface analysis," which unpacks how "A site's design makes a normative claim about its purpose and appropriate use" (p. 1060) and ultimately asks, "What beliefs drive design and are built in? And ultimately, what are the consequences of these design choices?" (Stanfill, 2015: 1062). As well, it borrows from Brock's (2016) "Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis," putting into practice "a holistic analysis of the interactions between technology, cultural ideology, and technology practice"—inseparable focal nodes in critical work on technology use (p. 14).

Guided by these frameworks, I was especially curious about the formal factors that create an environment that feels "secluded," as described by my informants. What, actually, makes this feeling possible? What structures afford "not as exposed?" What is "nobody knows you"—especially when that's not actually true, because, according to what they tell me, a lot of people *do* know you? And what makes other social media feel *less* secluded? Or, to flip the gaze again: what design decisions make it possible to be outed by the machine—a consequence of default publicness? In keeping with my goal to understand the biased normativities constitutive of "public" instead of micro-analyzing the private, what follows are four structural design decisions that, in various combinations, can create a situation of default publicness on a social media platform—precisely what my informants find alarming and "exposed" about spaces such as Facebook. This analysis understands these decisions as designed in service of a major imperative of platform capital: making sure that a user's demographic information, the content and nature of their expressive donations to the platform, and their links to others are as robust, verifiable, and easily indexed as possible.

### *Demands of platform membership include mapping one's connections on the platform onto previously extant offline networks*

This is the design feature of social media that creates the largest amount of anxiety for the queer youth of color with whom I spoke and interacted. Unlike other social media such as Facebook, Tumblr does not require any congruence to "real-life" (more on this below) in mapping connections on the platform. According to Pfitzmann and Köhntopp's (2009 [2001]) glossary of privacy-related terms in digital design, this is a demand that results in "linkability"—when an "item of interest" is linkable to an "identifier of a subject (ID)" (p. 5). Tumblr employs pseudonymity—users create a unique Tumblr name, which is then included in the unique HTML address of their blog. Furthermore, this is changeable at any time. In Pfitzmann and Köhntopp's (2009 [2001]) formation, this is an "initially unlinkable pseudonym"; "The linking between an initially unlinkable pseudonym and its holder is—at least initially—not known to anybody with the possible exception of the holder him/herself" (p. 5). This is a constituent property of, but unequal to, "anonymity," which can be thought of as a gradient as well as in motion: "Anonymity is the stronger, the less is known about the linking to a subject" (Pfitzmann and Köhntopp's, 2009 [2001]: p. 6).

In fact, in both Adam's and Rachel's cases, many of their Tumblr connections were indeed people who mapped onto real-life friend networks, to whom they were not anonymous. It was, rather, that the design did not *default* to extant-network connections, enabling Adam and Rachel to selectively curate whom they allowed to peek into this cloistered space of personal expression, engendering trust. Contrast this arrangement with, for example, a pseudonymous/unlinkable-identifier network that *does* map onto extant offline networks, such as the now-defunct Yik Yak (the network being your college), and you get a contextual frame with low trust and no fear of repercussion.

Although none of my informants mentioned it, I suspect that even the act of a social media platform *suggesting* network connections to offline ties, such as accessing your contacts or predictively mapping whom you could be connected to offline via your online connections' connections, may be enough to freak out a young queer person of color and discourage them from participation, or at the very least create an anxiety about expression.

*Identity on the platform is designed to be synonymous with one's "real" state-validated identity, as well as singular*

In default publicness, heteronormative understandings of identity as static, singular, intrinsic, and state-validated are woven into design. By "state-validated identity," I mean the identity that would be on your birth certificate, driver license, or the like—this is a purposefully specific and contextual phrase, because as we have seen with Dev's story, "real" is not specific enough to accommodate the complex formations of identity my informants inhabit regularly.

For example, as many of my informants have had to negotiate, Facebook is designed under the supposition that you are one user with one identity that is the same as a "real" identity that is valid within state apparatuses. This design manifests in subtle but important ways:

- Upon login, the platform takes you to one home page that is congruent with only one profile.
- It is hard or impossible to change not only your screen name but also your internal identifier to the system, be it your user name, e-mail address, or personalized HTML address.
- Legitimacy checks are built into the system, such as Facebook's historical requirement to belong to certain networks, including one's college or local area.
- Links to other state-validated apparatuses are encouraged, such as the wedding of your account to your primary mobile phone number to ensure singularity—you have a phone number, you get a bill or pre-pay, either of which is probably linked to a physical address, and so on.

If your singular, state-validated identity happens to exist in a homophobic cultural milieu (or if you are a woman escaping an abuser [boyd, 2010a], if you're a juvenile

convict [Lim et al., 2012], or many other potential user scenarios), this demand may engender liability at best, bodily danger at worst. Tumblr, in contrast, has no singular identity requirement (Renninger, 2014). Singular and state-validated identities are by design easier to surveil (and monetize) than multiple instantiations or less-officiated ones. A platform structure that demands one's "real" identity be instantiated in the digital space can have severe consequences for queer youth. We should remember that, in Dev's own words, his high school Facebook profile, which centered on his state- and extant-network-validated identity (in common parlance, "real") was what he called "fake" because homophobic social surveillance prevented him from expressing a meaningful, authentic array of feelings and opinions. Furthermore, he, like Rachel, had to be constantly vigilant, micro-managing almost every registrational interaction, for fear of the machine outing him in ways over which he had no control.

Additionally, admin policy, in a Möbius loop relationship with these design features, discourages or even punishes identities on the platform that are not mapped to state-validated public identities, as well as multiple simultaneous instantiations of identities. A high-profile instance of the problem of what exactly constitutes a "real" identity on Facebook occurred in 2014 when Facebook started deactivating the profiles of drag queens under a "real name" policy (MacAulay and Moldes, 2016). Amid hefty news media coverage, Facebook's Product Chief Chris Cox announced a reversal, though his *mea culpa* still didn't quite grasp the nuances of postmodern queer identity politics: "The spirit of our policy is that everyone on Facebook uses the authentic name they use in real life. For Sister Roma, that's Sister Roma. For Lil Miss Hot Mess, that's Lil Miss Hot Mess" (Guynn, 2014).

It is no wonder Facebook heavily polices its users' singular, bodily verifiability; this vigilant adherence to "real" identity on the platform is tightly aligned with the machine operation of platform capitalism. Its extractive force cultivates rich data, including a user's demographics, attitudes, and connections, that should be as verifiably "real" as possible in order to sell to paying advertisers hyper-targeted access to its users. As MacAulay and Moldes (2016) explain,

Facebook's real names policy prioritizes market and state interests over users'. It is hardly a coincidence that Facebook began enforcing the policy shortly after the July 31, 2012 news that 8.7% of its accounts were "fake" caused its share price to drop to 19.82 USD on August 2, 2012. (n.p.)

These policing tactics suggest eerie, expanded echoes of Browne's (2015) attention to historical public surveillance of the Black body, understanding its bodily "branding" (in all meanings) as biometric surveillance in service of capital (p. 89). In contrast, Tumblr's history is revealing in terms of its initial orientation toward this fundamental tenet of platform capitalism: founder David Karp famously told the *Los Angeles Times* in 2010, "We're pretty opposed to advertising ... It really turns our stomachs" (Milian, 2010)—a move he later regretted, calling himself an "idiot" for that statement in 2012 (Paul, 2012). Unsurprisingly, Tumblr has since struggled to incorporate a robust advertising model that does not fundamentally alter its structural dynamics (Bercovici, 2013).

*Direct communication between users is enabled, designed for ease of use and readability, and can be observed by other users*

By “ease of use and readability,” I mean text communication design choices such as being threaded, persistent, single-click, and screen-friendly. Twitter is the emblematic case here, though much of these observations apply to Facebook’s communication architecture as well. Most of my informants were not heavy Twitter users; if they did use Twitter, it was mostly to follow news or celebrities and not a conduit for intimate self-expression. Twitter thrives on the ease of publicly visible one-to-one communication as well as the traverse of the communication archive. In contrast, Tumblr is notoriously hard to read. Until relatively recently, the learning curve for figuring out how to even “respond” to another user’s post was laughably steep, and users simply could not message each other directly. What follows is a brief list of user communication design decisions on Twitter that were not nearly as simple (or even possible) on Tumblr, for most of its history:

- Direct messaging
- One-click functionality for reply or comment
- Visible, threaded replies or comments
- The ability for users to follow individual hashtags without having to follow the users who post using those tags
- The ability to join a conversation simply by doing an @reply to one or all parties and thus be immediately threaded into the conversation
- The ability for non-connected users or users who have low investment in the space, to engage in all of this discourse

These decisions create a terrain that is decidedly default public. They make it easy for unconnected strangers to troll because they make it easy to read the archive of a communication chain that they have not been part of as well as insert themselves instantly on equal footing. When users who have life-altering stakes at hand simply by *expressing* see the level of harassment that figures such as Leslie Jones or Anita Sarkeesian endure, or witness the public campaigns of hate levied by people such as Milo Yiannopoulos on these platforms, it is unsurprising that, as many of my informants mentioned to me, they are not heavily invested in Twitter.

Tumblr makes it difficult to follow exchanges between users, to the point that the satirical news site *Clickhole*, a spinoff of *The Onion*, ran a “story” in 2014 titled “Anthropologists Are on the Verge of Figuring Out How You’re Supposed to Read Tumblr Comments.” (The irony is not lost here.) Accordingly, trolling is tougher on Tumblr (Renninger, 2014). Historically, in order to “comment” or “reply,” you had to reblog the user’s entire post and append your commentary to the bottom, creating an entirely new post that appeared on *your* Tumblr. If the original poster wanted to answer back, they had to do the same with your post. After a few backs-and-forths, this resulted in near-unreadable in-post threading of these exchanges that spanned very long screen scroll-downs (especially on mobile). Each reply forced the previous threaded in-post content to be margin-tabbed further and further to the right into ever shorter lines of text,

with even individual words stretched over multiple text lines in a claustrophobic race toward the right margin of the screen. In order to even understand what to troll about, you had to be invested. Additionally, the ability to author a long post has benefits for the queer youth of color I interviewed—not because they do it, but because they have come across the occasional long post that is, for example, an explainer of introductory gender theory or an extensive list of foundational queer cinema.

### *Users are not fully in control of or even fully aware of the visibility to their network of all consequences of all their actions on the platform*

This is a familiar property of Facebook—when your aunt in Ohio, or Osaka, sees that you “liked” the Facebook page of a local LGBTQ organization, for example. As Rachel and Dev’s stories remind us, for queer youth of color who may not be out to their family, this design choice has consequences that are far more grave than mere awkwardness. The fact that something you do on a social media platform will be not only visible but *broadcast* to a vaguely defined set of your personal connections without your knowledge is a design bias that assumes safety in these actions being default public. Facebook’s response to these concerns, over the years, has been an array of “privacy” settings, but these remain difficult to comprehend, let alone access and manipulate—and the point of the problem is not the potential to eventually be private, but the default to publicness in the first place. It is in the interest of platform capital that these broadcasts be algorithmic and black-boxed to the user, which allows for a nimble, impersonal, machine efficiency in the transit of content as a vector for targeting and monetizing users—the same machine bias that automatically outed Dev and Rachel.

Tumblr, in contrast, does none of this. This is due to a delimited scope of potential activity from the get-go as well as a drastic transparency in the dynamics of circulation: you can pretty much only create a post, “like” or “reblog” another post, or “ask”/message a user. Furthermore, you already know that anything you post or reblog will be visible to anyone in the world if they know how and where to look but that there is so much “random noise” that you are basically “unobservable” (Pfitzmann and Köhntopp, 2009[2001]), that your “likes” are also transparent (though this has shifted back and forth over the years), and that every single user who likes or reblogs your post will leave a record and will generate a notification for you. Users have created cultural norms that acknowledge these properties: the common request to “do not reblog” if one is putting an extremely sensitive post out there just for their own followers, or putting polite warning tags on posts that have potentially upsetting content so that users who use third-party filtering software such as XKit can avoid them.

## **Conclusion**

When enacted, these design choices create a situation of default publicness on social media platforms, a situation that the queer youth of color I spoke with take great pains to negotiate on a day-to-day basis. These design choices rehearse heteronormative assumptions of publicity of act and speech into the design of a platform, a rehearsal that is also synonymous with the imperatives of platform capitalism. However, the goal of this essay

is not to proclaim that Tumblr is free from repercussions for queer youth, or that it is somehow free of homophobic or racist users. In fact, I would not go so far as to say that Tumblr is even a “safe space.” It was from Ixchel that I first learned about the dangers of “doxxing,” for example—when a user’s state-validated identity, including potentially sensitive personal information such as physical address, is revealed by other users. Additionally, several months after I interviewed Ixchel for the second time, news broke of a *Steven Universe* fan-artist’s suicide attempt after being bullied by other fans on Tumblr for drawing a *Steven Universe* character too skinny in her artwork (Romano, 2015). Although this is different from random fly-by trolling in a low-investment, default public such as Twitter, the aggressive policing of supposedly progressive identity politics on Tumblr is worthy of its own analysis.

As well, I do not want to paint a picture of queer youth of color as simply non-agentic victims of the machine. What I take from the Muñoz epigraph that opens this essay is both the gravity of the position of queer youth of color under intersecting regimes of oppression and the intimation that those queer youth of color who do survive have been able to develop robust strategies of resilience and vibrant in-group codes of exchange to simply fight to exist in the everyday.

The imperatives of platform capital, especially regarding default publicness on social media as a precondition for monetizability, have recently put Tumblr’s future in doubt. On 8 June 2017, shareholders approved the sale of Yahoo for US\$4.48b to Verizon, a legacy telecom giant (Weinberger, 2017). This included ownership of Tumblr, which Yahoo purchased in 2013 for US\$1.1b (Isidore, 2013). Verizon quickly instituted a default “safe mode” that was intended to filter out porn but also categorized masses of non-sexual LGBTQ user content as “NSFW” (“Not Safe For Work”) in an all-too-familiar conflation that underscores the always-precarious situation of public queerness (Castello, 2017; Minton, 2017). Tumblr staff endured sudden layoffs, and their new product head, Simon Khalaf, sparked internal outrage when he explained in a company meeting that “Black Lives Matter was an opportunity to [make] a ton of money,” according to one former Tumblr employee (Tiffany, 2017). Then, on November 27, 2017, Tumblr’s founder David Karp announced his resignation (Menegus, 2017).

Given that the very factors that make Tumblr a non-default-public space for counter-hegemonic expression are the ones that impede the targeted value-extractive mechanics of platform capital, it is unclear how this could happen sustainably on Tumblr without drastic changes to its architecture. Facebook’s own history is telling here, having gone through countless design iterations in order to extract and monetize user data and content as efficiently as possible while also giving users a taste of agency, as Bivens (2017) has judiciously tracked regarding the persistent binaries hidden within the 2014 gender choice update, to use just one example. Indeed, Facebook, decidedly default public, is massively profitable (Balakrishnan, 2017), while those in charge of Tumblr have issued only hazy revenue predictions to date (Dredge, 2014; Kuittinen, 2013). This does not bode well for Tumblr users, as we have seen precedent for the wholesale shutdown of platforms favored by non-hegemonic users, such as the closure of Vine in January 2017. What ultimately happens to Tumblr, its vibrant queer of color user base, and its mode of connecting engineered away from default publicness remains to be seen.

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## Notes

1. In a policy manifestation of this bias of the public eye, a ProPublica investigation in 2017 found that, according to Facebook's internal censorship rules, "white men" are literally a "protected category," whereas "subsets" such as "black children" should not be protected from hate speech (Angwin and Grassegger, 2017).
2. "Reblogging" is one of Tumblr's core functionalities. This happens when a user sees a post on someone else's Tumblr blog, presses the "reblog" button affiliated with it, and, after a few more clicks, it becomes published on their own Tumblr blog with an attached trail of "notes" that traces total likes and reblogs that post has received.
3. All names of informants in this essay are pseudonyms.

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