Northumbria Research Link

Deplatforming Sex: A Roundtable Conversation

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Hosted by Northumbria and Birmingham City Universities, the Deplatforming Sex roundtable took place via Teams in October 2021. Participants included Danielle Blunt, Stefanie Duguay, Tarleton Gillespie and Sinnamon Love. Clarissa Smith chaired the discussion, which was transcribed and then edited to cut digressions and repetitions for publication. The roundtable provided the opportunity to reflect on recent moves to excise sex and forms of sexual commerce and performance from online spaces, while marking out some key issues for future research with and about sex workers, performers and other content providers. Our discussion provided critical engagement with ongoing legislative changes that are impacting content and providers directly and indirectly.

Clarissa: We have four fantastic speakers here with us today, and we're hoping for a really productive conversation bringing together a range of activities and experiences centred on recent policy/governmental moves to deplatform sex. This roundtable goes alongside a special issue of the journal *Porn Studies* – to be published in December 2021 and which examines issues of deplatforming from a number of perspectives. We're particularly interested in the ways that decisions made in tech companies or by legislators, policy makers and politicians can have really significant impacts on sexual representations, imaginaries, and on sexual communities and very significantly impacting marginalized communities. Our speakers bring particular expertises to the discussion.

Our first speaker is Danielle Blunt: a sex worker, community organizer, public health researcher and co-founder of the sex worker collective Hacking//Hustling. Blunt has

undertaken community-based, participatory research on sex work published and referenced in a number of policy spaces. As well as her research with the Max Planck Institute for Computer Science Research, Blunt has a piece in our special issue – entitled 'Automating Whorephobia: Sex, Technology and the Violence of Deplatforming' (Blunt and Stardust 2021).

Stefanie Duguay is a Concordia University Research Chair in Digital Intimacy, Gender, and Sexuality. Her work has focused on the influence of digital media technologies in everyday life, with particular attention to sexual and gender identity and social media. This has included studies of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) people's social media use, dating apps, self-presentation, and everyday activism (Duguay 2016; Ferris and Duguay 2020).

Tarleton Gillespie is a Senior Principal Researcher at Microsoft Research, New England and an affiliated associate professor in the Department of Communication and the Department of Information Science at Cornell University. Among his many publications is the incredible *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions that Shape Social Media* (Gillespie 2018). His research focuses on online media platforms as distributors of cultural and political discourse, how algorithms are mediating public knowledge and participation – and the implications of both.

Finally, Sinnamon Love is an award winning performer and director of pornographic films – she has been a figure in the industry since the early 1990s and is, as well, a long-time activist on issues such as piracy and the impacts of FOSTA/SESTA. Sinnamon is constantly invited to contribute to media output from *Jezebel* to *Cosmo* but she is also an author in her own right and, in particular, her essay 'A Question of Feminism' (Love 2013) written for the *Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* is an important intervention in the thorny intersections of feminism and pornography, race and representation. She lives with an acquired traumatic brain injury and is the founder of the Black, Indigenous, and People of

Color Collective, providing financial assistance, mental health, and educational resources for sex workers.

I'm going to invite you each to start by telling us a little bit about your particular interests or concerns about deplatforming, and I'd like to start with Blunt and your activist, personal, or political concerns about the impacts of recent decisions by platforms and payment providers on sex workers and performers.

BLUNT: Sure! I am going to talk a little bit about my personal experiences being shadowbanned and deplatformed, and organizing around FOSTA/SESTA. In 2018, I was advocating against FOSTA/SESTA being signed into law and the sex work community was met with near silence from academia. My account was shadowbanned at the time, so it was very difficult to connect with community members to organize and share information outside of the sex working community. My tweets were demoted and gained next to no visibility, and I was met with promoted racist and sensationalized anti-trafficking ads from the supporters of the bill. In 2018, FOSTA/SESTA was signed into law using language of "stopping trafficking", despite the law actually making individuals more vulnerable to labour exploitation and violence.

We continue to see attempts to further amend Section 230[1] using similar tactics, imbued with moral panic that is devoid of facts, and ignores the lived experiences of the humans who are impacted by this legislation and subsequent platform responses. In Hacking//Hustling's research, we traced the impact of FOSTA/SESTA on the removal of Backpage (Blunt and Wolf 2020). We found that 72% of sex worker respondents face increased economic instability after FOSTA/SESTA; 34% reported an increase of violence from clients; and 81% are now facing difficulties advertising their services. Of our respondents with chronic illnesses, 26% are now facing exacerbated symptoms. Our later

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[1] Detailed discussion of Section 230 can be found in Kosseff 2021.

research, 'Posting into the Void' (Blunt et al. 2020), explored how content moderation practices harm sex workers. This research showed that sex worker respondents were significantly more likely to have experienced shadowbanning than their non-sex working peers, and that over half of those who identified as sex workers and as activists, organizers, or protesters reported being shadowbanned. They also were most likely to have their speech chilled online and most likely to avoid posting content for fear of being kicked off, being shadowbanned, or facing legal action. These are just some of the human impacts of FOSTA/SESTA.

Knowing what these impacts are and what they already have done to marginalized and under-resourced communities, I want us to be cautious of future proposed amendments and regulations. Especially if there has been no attempt to actually listen to the communities who are impacted, and who have histories of losing access to online spaces. Saying that sex workers are "unintended consequences" or "collateral damage" of legislation like FOSTA/SESTA is inaccurate, and further compounds the harm when the legislation conflates all prostitution with sex trafficking (Albert 2021). Particularly when sex workers warned and expertly predicted what the impacts would be if it were signed into law. Additionally, arguing that pornography is an unwanted part of the internet is not only factually inaccurate, but it is part of what creates the problem with sexual content moderation practices in the first place. People need and desire access to adult content, comprehensive sexual health information, abortion information, and harm reduction resources to safely advertise their work and build community. Academia is always trying to catch up with folks who are on the ground, and I'm very excited to be here in this conversation as both a researcher and a sex worker.

STEFANIE: A large part of my research has had to do with LGBTQ+ people's digital self-representation across different platforms and apps, which has meant looking at how and where people represent themselves on Tinder, Instagram, Vine (back in the day), and now

TikTok - even analyzing how this works out on platforms like Zoom. Many of my findings point to how hard it can be to express sexual identity and sexuality on these platforms, but also how valuable it can be. That through the expression of sexuality and sexual identity, people can develop themselves and their own sense of identity, they can forge meaningful relationships - whether friendships or hookups or dates - and they can come together in communities, publics and counterpublics, sometimes circulating messages that counter heteronormativity and other intersecting structures and systems of oppression.

So also stemming out of this research and in conversation with so much that's being written and thought about on this topic of deplatforming, I have three areas of concern or themes I'd like to explore. The first one involves platforms' failure to acknowledge and support the wide range of people with diverse sexual and gender identities across the world. I see this failure as stemming from multiple factors, but two in particular stand out. One is the lack of design choices and technological affordances for sexual expression and, on the other side, governance policies that are overly broad and, as several scholars have been writing about, governance policies that equate sex with being unsafe. Susanna Paasonen, Kylie Jarrett and Ben Light (2019) have written about this and they point out that lumping together hate speech and violence with sex just draws associations that are not equivalent.

Second, coming out of my research I've seen how other users on platforms play a role in constraining peoples' sexual expression. I think we talk a lot about platforms, but we don't always think about platforms and people coming together in combination to contribute to deplatforming. One way this happens is a result of platforms having to moderate at scale, so they install systems of co-moderation where people are helping with moderation by blocking and reporting other people. Much of the time it is a dominant population on a platform that does this - people who are motivated to block and report, sometimes politically motivated or morally motivated – so that what happens is a policing and targeting of counternormative content, especially sexual content. There's also a volume of harassment that takes place on

platforms; what Adrienne Massanari (2017) has called 'toxic technocultures' come together to leverage platform tools to bolster their discriminatory viewpoints while also targeting specific users and driving them from the platform.

Third, I am particularly concerned about the digital commercialization of sex and sexuality in ways that create a narrow range of acceptable and marketable expression. We've seen this in terms of platforms removing sexual content to remain advertiser friendly or to stay interoperable with payment services. This commercialization combines with issues of market competition within an attention economy and amidst algorithmic curation that rewards easy-to-brand self-expression, that in turn upholds representations of heteronormativity, whiteness, ableism and normative beauty ideals. Those are some of the concerns that I'd like to discuss.

TARLETON: I'm really glad for this special issue, and to be part of this conversation. The question of sexual expression was really what brought me to the topic of content moderation back in 2010. Back then we were talking about Apple dropping softcore apps off of their App Store, or Facebook blocking breastfeeding moms and topless museum statues. It seems quaint now. But if we attend to the lessons of print media, broadcast media, or the internet pre social media, we know that sex has always been one of the key concerns that drives efforts both to be more permissive and more restrictive about public expression. This is why I'm glad this conversation is happening – lately I feel like the public conversation about hate speech, polarization, and misinformation, all worthy topics of course, have overshadowed discussions of sexual expression. So, focusing on sexual expression, pornography, and sex work as a way to push on these problems of how and why platforms moderate is, I think, really effective. This is also the point that Kat Tiidenberg (2021) is making in her paper in this special issue.

For those who know my work, you'll know that I like to get fussy and obsessive about words. so I want to think about two words that show up a lot in this conversation. The first one is

"shadowbanning," (Cole 2018) which we hear all the time. I find it really interesting that the meaning of the term has drifted - Carolina Are (2021) has documented this really well. The original meaning, drawn from Usenet and bulletin board systems, was a very specific tactic where users were still allowed to post, so that it appears to that user that everything is normal, while no one else sees their content (Cole 2018). So, it was like a full ghosting effect, and that was a way to deal with trolls. As we've tried to amass evidence about what platforms are doing, we've ended up broadening this term so that it means almost any kind of algorithmic constraints, demotions, removals, and sometimes even lumping it together with just removals, bans and filters. I'm thinking about this because I'm finishing a paper that's trying to document what I think is a big move in the last couple of years, to what some of these platforms are calling 'borderline content' or 'reduction' techniques, and that there are now lots and lots of ways to suppress the circulation and visibility of content. So I'm including removing content from recommendations, recommending it less, not making friend suggestions, leaving it out of search results and blocking specific hashtags. The community of people who produce sexual content or pornography may be very specifically feeling the effects of this - especially with the kind of opacity and vagueness about exactly what's going on and what's happening. But for the platforms, I think it's just as much motivated by accusations that they amplify conspiracy content and misinformation, so a bigger impulse for them is that they're feeling like they should involve themselves in new kinds of much more subtle curation of content - that's having all sorts of effects for different communities and different topics.

It shouldn't surprise us that, when it comes to sex, these measures come down more heavily on marginalized creators and challenging voices. Sex is often the first thing to go, and often experiences the brunt of this treatment - and as Caroline Are and Susanna Paasonen (2021) point out in their article in this issue, there seems to be one rule for sex workers and amateurs, another rule for celebrities. This is not surprising.

The second term that I think we should think about is 'deplatforming' - which we are using as the title of this roundtable. The meaning of deplatforming is also changing in really interesting ways. At first, I think it very specifically meant not just being removed from one platform entirely, not just removing a category of content like when Tumblr radically changed its policies, but the possibility of being removed from *many or all* platforms simultaneously. Again, as we are amassing evidence against these platforms for the ways they mishandle these things, purposefully and otherwise, I think there's something valuable about holding on to the complexity of this term. That original concern, that you could not only be banned from one site, but could find yourself excluded from many, raises a whole bunch of really troubling questions about how platforms end up coordinating, either explicitly or because there is political cover to act (once one intervenes, other ones can do the same); obviously, the pressure from advertisers who expect certain kinds of standards; and the pressure of regulation or the threat of regulation. And the last thing is what we saw with OnlyFans: the pressure from infrastructural actors - whether it's the banks or the payment services or cloud computing services or the App Store – setting standards that then the other platforms can't find a way not to abide by.

I want to hold onto this precision, not just because social science should be precise, but also because I think the platforms evade criticism when we say 'you are shadowbanning', and they say 'no, we're not' (Cotter 2021) They can mean the specific definition, and dodge the broader critique. Because in some ways, these techniques and these issues are broader than just the way sex workers and people who engage in sexual expression are experiencing them, for understanding where these things happen, why they happen, how they get justified both internally to the platforms and externally. I think it affects the thrust of our critique, it affects where we should look for evidence, where we should look for explanation, and where we look for opportunities to intervene. So I want to keep those ideas alive in our conversation.

SINNAMON: I'm so excited about this topic! Interestingly enough when Clarissa and I were exchanging emails regarding payment, the option she suggested was PayPal - but I was in the first round of sex workers kicked off of PayPal back in the early 90s! Over the course of my 26 year career, I have been kicked off of PayPal, Square, Venmo… I could go through the list! I've been systematically kicked off various platforms even when I was actually processing credit cards directly at a point of sale.

But I think one of the things that I'm most interested in is the very beginning of this saga, particularly around Black and brown bodies, starting from 1985/86 2 Live Crew were at the centre of attempts to censor music: one store clerk was arrested for selling the album to a 14-year-old girl in 1988, followed by more arrests of store clerks. Moving into the early 1990s 2 Live Crew were prosecuted for the explicit lyrics on *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* (Schwarz 2015; Patrin 2020). Calls for regulation were ramped up and as a result we have the parental advisory sticker here in the US because campaigners objected to 2 Live Crew's music and the sexually explicit nature of their lyrics (Berlant 1995). I don't think there's enough conversation about the intersections between hip hop music and the porn industry - it's widely overlooked and I think it shouldn't be, because the two industries are siblings of each other. The porn industry mirrors the music industry in a lot of ways, for example in terms of the ways that people market themselves, the way that companies market performers and artists, as well as the ways in which artists are largely left out of larger revenue streams in comparison to how much the companies make.

I think it's important to think about the ways in which the parental advisory sticker in music doesn't exist - you know, it exists but doesn't exist - within the porn industry, right? So we know that everything has to be 18 and over; like we have that 18 and over age identifier that needs to be on every website. But largely we still have this kind of pushback that we experience from the greater culture. I love the fact that Blunt brought up FOSTA/SESTA - we know porn and sex online continues to be conflated with prostitution here in the US.

Prostitution and pornography have been deemed separate from each other since 1988 with the People v. Freeman (46 Cal.3d 419) case. So it's really disturbing to me that anti sex worker/anti trafficking evangelicals have tried to conflate the two of them in an effort to rid the internet of all sex and all sex work. It's the harm that is done to marginalize creators, in particular people of the global majority who exist at the intersections of race, gender, sexual identity, and ability. It makes it very difficult for people who are already living in these margins, who are already not receiving the kinds of services and assistance they should receive from the government. People are systematically being harmed by those who would rather we undertake labour that is largely inaccessible to many people, particularly to those of us who identify as being chronically ill, or disabled, or living in communities of colour that are experiencing other kinds of marginalization, and lack of access to education and employment. There is a violence to claiming, as evangelicals do, that these forms of labour are better than sex work. Harm is being done by pushing people off of the internet and is only creating more vulnerability. For a lot of people like myself, sex work is an option because other options are not accessible. And we have to understand the ways in which eliminating these safer options actually creates more harm for many of us.

CLARISSA: So I guess that's a good place to move to by continuing some of that discussion, Sinnamon, around the impacts that deplatforming have had on the work, rights and safety of sex workers. It might be useful if Blunt could just spell out what FOSTA/SESTA are, and if you could explain the court judgment that made the separation between prostitution and pornography, and then we could move on to talk about the impact of FOSTA/SESTA.

BLUNT: In 2018, there was a combination of bills that amended Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, making platforms liable for the content that their users were posting. This was passed under language to "stop trafficking", but the bill did not differentiate between prostitution and trafficking. Because of the breadth and the vagueness of the bills, there was a mass platform over-response to avoid the potentially financially damaging

litigation. So what we saw was Craigslist removing their personal services, social media websites more heavily moderating and policing sexual content, and platform after platform being removed from the web. Sex workers used those platforms to stay safe and advertise their services.

I think it's important when talking about FOSTA/SESTA to at least mention that this is not the first time that sex workers have been removed from a website. We have a long history of moving to online spaces and then criminalization or platform policing encroaching on those spaces that we migrate to. Or as soon as the company is turning a profit and has built their audience using sex worker creative labour and ingenuity, kicking sex workers out of those spaces. I see FOSTA/SESTA as just an expansion of the criminalization of sex work and an extension of what has been happening in online spaces for years.

SINNAMON: I was talking about People v. Freeman which saw a porn producer by the name of Harold Freeman charged on counts of pandering and, under section 266i of the California Penal Code, for pimping. The prosecution claimed that his hiring of male and female adult actors was pimping – and if they had won, it would have completely shut down the California pornographic film industry. Freeman lost the case initially, but the California Supreme Court granted review on appeal, agreeing that the pandering statute was not meant to apply to filmmakers. As a result of that judgement, porn is legal in the United States (Cohen 1989).

I think it's really interesting to think about how just one year prior, there are the attempts to censor sexually explicit music, and then just a short time later there was the separation of prostitution and pornography. Not just in terms of the adult film industry, that era, the obscenity battles in court really were very highly charged. I mean we can go back and look at other things that were happening at that time and the ways in which the late 1980s really shaped our current landscape when it comes down to what is considered obscene.

TARLETON: I would add that Blunt is exactly right about FOSTA - when I look back at FOSTA, everything wrong with how US policy tends to deal with these things is right there. You can feel the moralizing and discomfort about sex, and their inability to actually clarify in subtle ways different kinds of sexual work and different kinds of concerns, so it got lumped together in this really atrocious way. And the approach that 230 represents is basically: 'We don't want to go in and say here's an expectation of how you can support certain kinds of practices, or have thoughtful moderation that has different tiers of different understandings.' Instead it's, 'you're clear and free from liability, except when we carve-out something and now you're absolutely liable for it'. So it is not that surprising that a sensible platform would go 'we don't want to mess with that category because we're suddenly facing one, two, a dozen lawsuits'. So there's also a problem there with the very approach that 230 and carve-outs like FOSTA/SESTA represent. It's not surprising that sex was the worst handled version of those carve-outs because of our inability to have those conversations, especially in the US.

SINNAMON: We often see this with very specific communities in terms of language. It is widely known that people from marginalized communities have a tendency of adopting previously harmful language and changing it, reclaiming that language as a means of empowerment. Within Black communities we have reclaimed the N-word for our own, as a part of our language, or people reclaiming the word 'fat,' or queer people reclaiming the word 'queer'. And we've begun to see differentiation when it comes to moderation around using these terms. But when it comes to sex, we don't see this kind of capable moderation where people within the sex trade can use words like 'whore' and 'ho', or whatever, and be able to use that language freely, but at the same time be able to report people who are using harmful language towards us as sex workers. To have that language taken seriously and have people sanctioned for their harassment of sex workers.

CLARISSA: I wonder whether we could have some discussion around whether or not it's possible for platforms to balance protection of users from hate speech or invasions of privacy? How do we balance protection and also keep diverse sexual content and the ability to forge communities around sex and sexual labour. I wonder if Stefanie and Blunt might want to come in on this?

STEFANIE: Yeah, I can share some thoughts. I guess also these are illustrations of what Sinnamon just said - illustrations of how current platform governance is so broad. So, the way that regulation is carried out by algorithms or programmed into these systems wipes out a lot of meaningful speech along with that which could be harmful. For example, in my research, the hashtag #lesbian on Instagram was banned for years - you would look it up and no content would come up (or a select amount of 'Top' content would be visible but nothing else), and so that lumps together people who were posting content that violated Instagram policies such as those prohibiting nudity or ads for escort sites, but at the same time it also wipes out anybody who is abiding by policy guidelines but also expressing their sexual identity. So obviously these broad tools are not working for us, and it's complicated because, as Tarleton has pointed out, there is such a volume of content. But I think one of the solutions lies in looking at, how can we reprogram platforms to give users greater agency? How can users be involved in more decisions? Decisions that give users more choices about *what* they see and *who* can see what they put out there. For many platforms their default is sharing, and sharing widely, and connecting across platforms. We saw that as Facebook and Instagram and WhatsApp all went down (Isaac and Frenkel 2021): they are all intricately connected right now, whether we want them to be or not, and whether we want the content that we put on them to be spread so widely. So, I think giving users greater say in that can be really helpful.

BLUNT: I definitely want to echo what Stefanie is saying about providing users more choice. Something that I had been thinking about, which I now see platforms doing, is allowing you

to block users, and any other future accounts that they might make, based on their IP address. It was always so frustrating for me to get a device ban on my sex worker social media and not be able to make more accounts – knowing that platforms are able to ban me in that capacity but, as someone who is regularly harassed online, I can't use that same technology to protect myself and my community. That's something that I've seen platforms adopt more recently, which provides users with more choice. I want to bring this into the conversation – Tarleton sort of touched on it – how FOSTA/SESTA was passed using very inflammatory rhetoric around trafficking and was not super informed about how technology works or how trafficking functions. I want to talk about how sex workers and survivors are not always disparate communities, and that platforms will not be able to tell the difference. Legislation that erases sex workers from the internet and pushes them further underground also makes survivors of trafficking in the sex industry less safe. We need to understand that any industry under capitalism is vulnerable to labour exploitation. Workers need more resources, not less, regardless of what their relationship to their labour is. Losing access to their communities and to financial resources makes sex workers and survivors more vulnerable to exploitation, stigma, and violence. It is not about a decision that tech should be making for users, but providing people with educational resources and tools to curate what is in their feeds.

SINNAMON: Yeah I agree. I have long debated whether or not having 18 and over sections of these platforms would be helpful, because it limits the wider scope of advertising capabilities for adult creators – these are often important, especially for those of us who are in both the sex work and the community organizer realm. It's helpful to have access outside of the adult community, to reach the general consumer who may not necessarily be looking for adult content, but at the same time wants to have information about what's going on within their communities and the legislation that's being passed. This lumping, putting everyone behind this wall makes it easier to deplatform them if you know they are in an 18 and over section. How do we give sex workers the opportunity to step outside of the sex

work realm through advertising and brand partnerships and promoting legal products, such as sex toys or enhancement products or lingerie? We have major brands like Victoria's Secret or Fenty that are regularly used by sex workers in their marketing and their advertising and content creation, but we don't have the same kind of ability to build these brand partnerships which would allow us to step outside of the boundaries of the 18 and over content, because we are largely banned and restricted from doing any kind of advertising across different platforms.

BLUNT: I just want to add two experiences I've had. One is of losing access to a financial payment processor that had nothing to do with my sex work. I am a sex worker and whether I stop doing sex work or not, society, social media platforms, and payment processors will always treat me like a sex worker. Even when sex workers are doing other types of work or transitioning to other labour sectors, we still lose access to technologies, which creates barriers to doing other types of labour. The other thing that happens to sex worker researchers when they go looking for their own articles or looking for things to add to their CV, they Google themselves and come up with zero results when the 18+ filter is on. Their entire work history, regardless of whether it is directly related to pornography or sex work, is erased. So it compounds this idea that if you have done sex work, there is no way to not have done it. The stigma and violence follows you around, both socially and algorithmically.

SINNAMON: Yeah, I would just like to piggyback on that. This phenomena of sex workers being kicked off of Airbnb, for example, is something that regularly happens. I don't even add my photo to a lot of my non-adult platforms because I know that they are using this information to be able to kick me off a platform based on my other work. I had a run in with Airbnb where they tried to kick me off of the platform. I was travelling with my kids and I was in the middle of a booking when they kicked me off. I had to send them a really nasty email basically alleging discrimination against them in order to get my account back. This happens a lot and especially when we have widespread instances of housing insecurity among sex

workers, when Airbnb is taking over in neighbourhoods previously lived in by people experiencing social and economic disparity. People are often using Airbnb in lieu of hotels because hotels are expensive, and when you cut out that kind of access it is discriminatory at best, and it is creating harm.

TARLETON: I struggle in my work all the time, watching decisions platforms make and wavering between looking at that as a product of business sensibility - of hardline decisions about profit and advertising, you know, being small-C conservative about challenging content - and on the other side, as just the kind of shortcuts that they have to take to function at the scale that they do. This is not to absolve them of blame, but to understand why they make these mistakes so often. We love to think Facebook or Instagram are sitting there, moustache twiddling, going 'what should we delete today?' And I think there are some really problematic decisions they've made, for those reasons you've said. But the other side is, they're riding this torrent of cultural content like they can barely hold on! So the idea of being able to say 'I gotta know what images to block' - there's no person that's making this decision. In a lot of cases they're going to flag things automatically, so they've got a dumb algorithm that presumes, if a couple of Blunt's posts before were X-rated, that it's a pretty good guess that the next one will be too. That's a really dumb logic for how people actually communicate - it's an algorithmic logic that says patterns persist, that can't cope with the subtlety of what people do, how they conduct their professional or social lives - that they have multidimensional qualities to what they do on a particular platform. So as Stefanie said before, they are playing at immense scale, and that means that they can't be culturally subtle! They have to think about people as either a faceless audience - a community of millions, which is a meaningless sort of idea - or as data points, as a spreadsheet of data subjects. That's the only solution they've come up with, so we're always going to have this problem of lived communities saying 'it really hurts that I got banned today,' or 'my post got taken down,' or 'it thought I was one thing and then it treated me like that through all of my different posts and practices.' While the platforms are going, 'how do we design software

that gets us through the day, so that we don't end up being on the front of the Wall Street Journal this week?' Most get it right most of the time, but they are very unsophisticated techniques. They might sound sophisticated because they have code in them, but they are unsophisticated when it comes to culture.

STEFANIE: I appreciate that dose of reality, but I just want to echo what Sinnamon and Blunt have been saying about the immense impact of that moderation. It's true that it's easier on the bottom line of these platforms, but on the other hand there are so many people who are now using platforms like Instagram for showcasing their everyday lives but also for things like brand partnerships, and the ways they make money, within the broader expansion of gig work and in people leveraging modes of microcelebrity to get by, along with what would be their day jobs. The tools that are being used to moderate sexual content knock out content that doesn't even violate policy. One example from my work includes an individual trying to form a clothing brand, whose posts with lesbian models were blocked and removed and their account threatened because of moderation that is overly sensitive to - not even sexual content - but the expression of sexual identities. So yes, these tools need to work for the platforms functioning at this scale, but they're also designed in tandem with a certain ideology that increasingly denies the value of any sexual expression. I've been studying queer people's dance parties held over Zoom during the various lockdowns throughout the pandemic. One of Zoom's guidelines prohibits sexual activity and any activity that may cause sexual arousal. That's very broad right? There's a lot that can fall under that guideline and they don't say how and whether they would enforce it but that's the kind of broad policy that would have the power to knockout entire communities of people who are meeting. You know, this has been one of the few outlets they have had during the pandemic to express their sexuality.

TARLETON: Can I just bring back something that Stefanie said earlier? because the question is, what else could we do? The platforms tell this story as if this is the only solution

to scale, and some people are saying 'well, then you shouldn't be at that scale.' But this suggestion that Stefanie made, about trying to give much more of the moderation power to the users - I completely agree - and I want to add, let's be careful not to think only about individual users, let's think about communities of practice, right? The platforms are never going to understand the thing Blunt said about how sex workers and survivors overlap in really complicated ways. That's not something they are going to get - either because of scale, or they're not sensitive to it, or they're not motivated to figure it out. So how do you give communities of users, who do have that kind of understanding, the ability to moderate together? It took forever for Twitter and some of the other sites to offer shared blocklists. Women who are being harassed could gather that expertise - as cruelly earned as it is - and then build on that, share that. But the platforms have a failure of imagination when it comes to understanding community: not as some sort of vacant term to describe the millions of people on their platform, but as real communities with real expertise - and then actually serve those communities with the tools to safeguard each other. Instead, they built a free-for-all, an open market, claimed there are no problems, and then grudgingly provided customer service to clean up the trash. We've seen that this is just not working for the immense array of practices on these platforms.

SINNAMON: I want to jump in on a couple of different things. So, the algorithms have shown that they do have the ability to differentiate between the multifaceted aspects of people's lives because they do it with celebrities! So if Cardi B posts a video of her from the back, or if Megan thee Stallion, or Lizzo, posted a video in a thong from the back twerking, they're not going to take that down. They're not going to deplatform Cardi, Megan or Lizzo, but if I do it, then because I am a sex worker, they are going to take me down. It is very targeted harassment, based on respectability politics - who are the acceptable whores or who are the acceptable gays or who are the acceptable queers? And so it's not that the companies haven't got the tech or can't do it, they choose to do it in ways according to their view of what's commercially viable. They're not going to deplatform Cardi B or Megan the Stallion or

Lizzo or anybody else who they think are okay, you know? We saw this last year with Bella Thorne - it is a violation of Instagram's terms of service if you link to sexually explicit content on their platform. You cannot do sexually explicit performance - back to Stefanie's point - sexually explicit dancing was added to Instagram's terms of service a couple of years ago as one of their banned types of content. But depending on who you are, if you are an acceptable whore then you can absolutely have those links and not be at risk of deplatforming, or shadowbanning. The other thing that I wanted to point out and I'm trying to remember the last thing that you said Tarleton, can you repeat it?

TARLETON: Oh, about communities having expertise and being able to moderate for themselves?

SINNAMON Yes, yes. So platforms have an opportunity, they sit down with evangelical, anti-porn, anti-sex work folks, but when it comes down to moderation they do not meet with sex workers to be able to talk about and think through the ways they could moderate without actually causing harm to the community. In all kinds of organizing spaces we talk about how decisions about us without us are worthless. And yet sex workers are continually left out of conversations around moderating the community. Some of these issues around like, let's say dancing, or linking to profiles, could be alleviated if we were brought to the table to be able to have some sort of say. In the sex trade, we had 'bad date' sites; we were sharing information about clients who were causing harm to sex workers and FOSTA/SESTA eliminated those. It eliminated access to resources! Once again, this goes back to this issue of respectability politics - it's like if women want to share blacklists of people who are causing harm on Twitter, that's okay, but God forbid that there are sex workers who are trying to protect themselves from physical harm from people who are either beating up sex workers, raping them, or robbing them.

BLUNT: I think it's also important to talk about the hidden human labour that is constituted in some of those actions of the algorithm - whether it's a body of underpaid and exploited

workers who are doing the very laborious and traumatizing work of actually clicking through images or doing moderating work. There was a recent article (Horwitz 2021) about Facebook's programme called 'XCheck,' which provides a list of celebrities whose content is not moderated the same as general users. Celebrities have Instagram contacts, who can help them get their account back, or they can preemptively send photos of their ass to Instagram to ask which one of these falls within the guidelines. So I think it's the opaqueness of what is happening, with both the algorithm and what is happening at the platform. Stefanie touched on this too, talking about the ways that users are able to weaponize content moderation systems to systematically remove marginalized communities from their spaces.

TARLETON: I was thinking about that XCheck article too when Sinnamon was speaking! And the other point of that article was that some of the things that should have been taken down, such as when the soccer star Neymar was posting nude photos of a woman who was charging him with sexual assault, they were left up for days. So it's not even that the system can't discern, it's that the companies build mechanisms to privilege very high follower-count accounts and celebrities and well known politicians, and are failing to address all sorts of problems. We're still learning, not just how the technology works, not just what the labour practices are, but how the entire system of moderation ends up being built. The most shocking thing about that Facebook article was that that XCheck list had gotten to 5.8 million people - it wasn't just a case of treating Trump differently. That's a whole different tier of moderation (Caplan and Gillespie 2020) creating the discrepancies Sinnamon was talking about. And the uncertainty, I think, that the people who find themselves on the wrong end of these moderation policies feel, especially when it affects their livelihood, is like "not only am I running into this wall and there's not much I can do about it - I can't make a phone call to Instagram - but also I don't even know whether it happened; I don't know how much my image didn't circulate; I don't know why I got demonetized.' That uncertainty is another level

of kind of precarity to conducting your work or conducting your public reputation role or whatever it is you do on social media.

SINNAMON: One of the things that I see happen quite often is that there are always bad actors at these platforms who will charge people to get their platforms back. I see it happen all the time. I know a sex worker who knew someone at Instagram who they paid every time they were deplatformed, and this person was charging them $800 to get their profile back. Other people would see this happen and say 'how is it that you get your account back and I can't?' This is what we're talking about when we talk about exploitation, right? Exploitation within the platforms and people who are extorting money out of sex workers to be able to get these accounts back, because they know that if you're getting organic followers it is really, really hard to get those numbers up and you depend on those numbers. We depend on these platforms to be able to participate in the gig economy, and I wish that we could have more emphasis on that type of vulnerability and that type of exploitation that happens when people are deplatformed.

CLARISSA: I feel really hesitant to interrupt now because it's such a fascinating discussion but I also want to give our audience an opportunity to ask some questions now?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yes please! So I'm a doctoral PhD student and I'd be interested to know if you know of any initiatives run by sex workers to create platforms, starting up platforms for themselves?

SINNAMON: I was actually involved last year in a platform that is positioning itself to be a cooperative platform similar to OnlyFans. There are efforts being made by sex workers to do this work. The problem is that we are facing occupational discrimination when it comes down to banking. The banking laws, particularly in the US, really make it difficult and challenging for sex workers to get a platform off the ground that is dealing with sex. Now Mastercard's new regulations around adult content are going to make it even harder for people to be able

to get platforms like this off the ground. The company that I was with lost two bank accounts and didn't even have an MVP [minimal viable product] yet. We see this happen often with individual sex workers, where you lose not only your payment processors but also your entire bank account, and that is only doubled when it comes to trying to get a platform off the ground! To circumvent some of these issues is difficult, and perhaps the only reason why OnlyFans was able to do what it does is because the founder's father has banking connections (Davies 2020; Nilsson 2021). So unless sex workers have some sort of an in like that, we are always going to come up against these kinds of difficulties when it comes to launching our own platforms.

BLUNT: Yeah and also the clients aren't always on the smaller sites, so it is very difficult to build a website that competes with OnlyFans and the amount of traffic they have on the market they've cornered. When I think about building sites that are just for sex workers - it's been done, but driving the money and the traffic there is very difficult. It limits our ability to market our services to a general audience and decreases our income. Sex worker ingenuity is really amazing, and I'd love to see what comes out of it. Maybe I'll be surprised, be more optimistic. But really I think it is so important for sex workers to have access to the same tools that their non-sex working peers have access to, and I always try to bring it back to that point. That we're just trying to create workarounds for not having access to the systems where the money is.

STEFANIE: I just wanted to add on to that really good point about wanting to be where all the people are, needing to be where the people with the networks are. You know when Tumblr made the decision to rid its platform of sexual content (Tiidenberg, Abidin, & Hendry, 2021), the notice from the CEO said there's plenty of other places that people can go online to see porn. But when you think about the large volume of youth on Tumblr and the ways they were exchanging sexual content and sexual information as a form of grassroots sex education, you have to ask, where are the places for them to go? The most popular or

dominant tube sites don't provide that kind of content or circulation. And if they're going to develop their own websites or move to more obscure platforms, then that raises the bar for people to seek out those platforms. Also, often the technical expertise needed to protect those hubs of community from harassers when they show up is specialized. So yeah, telling people to just go elsewhere on the internet doesn't work very well.

BLUNT Especially for marginalized communities who are using aliases to work! Not having the same digital security measures in place or the same kind of customer support systems from the platform can be a really dangerous thing. Just having a whole network of a marginalized community makes it much easier to police and shutdown.

TARLETON: This is the problem with what deplatforming is. It is one thing to find you're no longer on Twitter, it's another to find that you are off of *all* the biggest platforms that provide your audience or provide those resources. Beyond that, there are these rings of specialized platforms such as Onlyfans, and for that matter spaces like Gab and Parler – but should we shunt everyone off to a narrow community of interests? Beyond those, you've got small sites that can't effectively support you and there's no audience, and then you've got the open web, and the dark web. Pushing some things out to those outer rings is possible, those sites are available, but how we distribute people and practices across those zones matters a great deal. We're saying - and this has been done lots of times - sex belongs in one spot, sex belongs on this corner not that corner. We've had that discussion before, and that is one solution for how the public deals with explicit content, but it's not the most progressive solution, and it can have all sorts of tragic consequences for who is then left unsafe, and also for who cannot then earn. So how we finally find spaces for communities of practice, but also let them stay in those spaces where we encounter each other, but also give each other tools to avoid them if you want to? That's the big challenge for our moment.

SINNAMON: Yeah. The thing is there are spaces on the internet that exist for sex and porn but that doesn't stop the National Center on Sexual Exploitation and Exodus Cry from trying

to shut them down. They do not want sex to exist on the internet at all. They equate all sex work with trafficking. I got into a debate with the vice president of NCOSE on Twitter where she said that the sex worker is being robbed, that it's not rape it is petty theft. They don't believe that any sex work is work. They do not believe that people who live in various intersections of marginalization - if you are poor or queer or trans or Black or brown - have the ability to consent. They feel that lower social economic status means your choice is not truly autonomous. So, you know, their goal isn't for us to have sex work safe spaces, their goal is for us to not do it at all. Instead they want us to work in other industries that are equally open to the possibility of exploitation - they think that domestic labour and food service are better than sex work because they think that there's no exploitation there. They're not attacking real exploitation, they just want to get rid of sex work.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I'm thinking about this kind of legitimation of suspicion and paranoia from the platform. For example, the thing about shadowbanning is you're not really sure if you really are banned or not, and that is a form of violence from the platform. I'm thinking with a recent Max Haiven's book on revenge capitalism (2020), and that this kind of discrimination fits his framing. But I'm wondering what kinds of collective forms of resistance might be possible?

BLUNT: I think it's super important to validate the lived experiences of sex workers and believe what they say their experiences are, whether or not there is academic research to support it. Part of what Hacking//Hustling wanted to do with the research on FOSTA/SESTA was fill in a gap in the body of research on its long-term impact. So we did a community, participatory-based survey to see where the community was at, bypassing traditional academic publishing institutions. So I think this conversation is important because we have sex workers present here - it is great to be here and be here with you, Sinnamon, as part of the conversation, not just sharing our experiences as sex workers, but being just as relevant as those building the content moderation systems that we are navigating.

SINNAMON: I wanna emphasize that the field of study of sex work and pornography is still really new. Constance Penley was the first person in the United States to even to teach about sex work and pornography, so the type of academic research currently being done has largely come from academics interviewing sex workers for their research. To echo Blunt, it's super important to remember that early research around sex has always come from participants. It is important to listen to sex workers, learn from sex workers because our *lived* experience is going to be what your research is based on anyway. One of the biggest problems that I have with academic research is that often people are not compensating sex workers for their research. They want sex workers to participate, they want to learn, they want to interview them and learn from them for the sake of their paper, their book, their degree. And that research gets published, but sex workers are not getting adequate compensation for contributing to that work. Most are not getting the types of opportunities to then go on university panels or these speaking engagements and being able to collect money from that. Particularly those who are not as open and out and don't have the kind of public cachet that Blunt and I have, that creates an unfairness. I'd like to see more work done on making sure that there is funding for these interviews with sex workers. For many years I stopped doing interviews with academics because too often I would have to fly myself and put myself up to speak as a keynote for a panel. That's where the biggest problem lies within the union between academia and sex workers.

BLUNT: I just want to quickly add that it's a funding thing as well. Because of the conflation of sex work and trafficking, it is very difficult to have funding, which makes us very reliant on the free labour of sex workers. My organizing, and the organizing of Hacking//Hustling, is largely funded based on client and community donations. It is very rare that we get funding from external sources. Academics need to understand why it is important to compensate sex workers for their lived experiences. Compensation needs to be the norm.

TARLETON: I want to ask Clarissa, if I can put you on the spot? For this special issue, you, Feona, and John must have had thoughts about how that balance of who you're learning from works?

CLARISSA: It is a real problem for us, because we really don't have money to pay anybody to be an author for us, but we absolutely do want sex workers and performers to write for us! Blunt has done that, and Jiz Lee (2015; 2016) has written for us in the past, and is on the editorial board, as well as Stoya (2014) Courtney Trouble (2014), Madison Young (2014). But it is a problem because we don't have funds for commissioning authors. We've also got the problem that open access is not something that we can offer - we're published by Routledge, and they are a business looking to fund open access through a payment system. It is a real problem for us because we would like the journal to be read beyond the academic community with access to a library subscription. For this event it was important for us to have sex worker voices and to offer some compensation to our speakers, so we have funded that through our universities, though that funding always assumes regular employment. Some members of our audience have contributed to a donation for a sex worker charity of Blunt's and Sinnamon's choosing (BIPOC)[2]. It is an issue though and, certainly in the UK, in the context of shrinking funding and the questions raised by ethics boards about whether we should be paying people for their contributions to research - my thoughts here are that yes, absolutely, we should compensate people for the actual time they have spent helping us - not least so that we're not just talking to those people who don't *need* compensation. But I don't think, if there's room for confessional, I don't think I've been good enough at this in the past, I haven't always recognized the unfairness and I do need to do better.

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[2] **The BIPOC Adult Industry Collective** is a performer and sex worker-led collective offering education and support services to empower community members financially. https://www.gofundme.com/f/help-bipocaic-provide-mutual-aid-and-fight-racism

TARLETON: I ask not because there is a simple answer, but because it does feel like there are some misfits between those expectations and the goal of getting these different kinds of expertise into the room together. It's a really interesting problem.

SINNAMON: Yeah, I'm very sensitive to this issue of compensating marginalized communities for research because, as a Black woman, there has been a long history of Black people, Black women being used for scientific research and not being compensated. Henrietta Lacks[3] is in the news yet again because her cells have been used for the development of the coronavirus vaccine, so when we look at the ways in which marginalized people have forever been a part of important scientific research but not fairly compensated, or at all, or their contributions not credited (Wolinetz and Collins 2020). We cannot continue to allow academia to use marginalized folks or Black folks or queer folks to advance research while not giving them something! Even if it is just $25, and if there is possibility for money later on down the line to make sure to contact them and give that money. Seeking outside funding as Blunt mentioned is really difficult, and I know that academic institutions have restrictions around the ways in which they can fund raise, but there have to be more creative solutions to fund research and make sure that people are compensated - particularly those who are most vulnerable to being used to enhance someone else's privilege.

CLARISSA: I am so glad that we are finishing this discussion now focusing on what researchers can do to foreground the voices and expertise sex workers, and that you've made such a clear statement of the need to treat research partners fairly. This has been an absolutely fascinating discussion and we've ranged over so many topics, I would like to thank you all for your contribution – I am sure this is just the first of many such conversations.

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[3] 'Honoring Henrietta: The Legacy of Henrietta Lacks' Johns Hopkins Medicine. https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/henriettalacks/

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