

THE OLD PUPPET MASTERS: CONTENT MODERATION ON COMPUTER
BULLETIN BOARD SYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT

As monopolistic digital platforms have seized enough power over speech to become the “new governors” of speech, a robust discourse surrounding the contemporary legal and market forces that shape content moderation has emerged. However, this discourse is missing solid historical roots in the earliest days of digitally mediated moderation on hobbyist computer bulletin board systems. Building off the work of Kevin Driscoll, using oral histories and archival research, I examined what regulatory forces impacted how system operators and BBS callers practiced content moderation. This research found that on hobbyist computer bulletin board systems, content moderation was viewed more as an act of community formation than through the lens of balancing censorship and free speech rights. SysOps were the puppet masters who had ultimate control over how code and normative forces could regulate the content and community that was allowed on their bulletin boards. Each BBS could be entirely different depending on the whims of the SysOp. but many BBSs treated the expectations of speech and civility as directly analogous to having real people in one’s home. Ultimately, this thesis endeavors to be part of the tide of new scholarship that aims to complicate existing narratives of networked histories so that we might begin to understand the contemporary regulatory forces shaping our digital world.

I truly could write another thesis chronicling my appreciation for those who have helped me achieve this goal. As a compromise, here's a collection of little notes to the ones who have pushed, inspired and lifted me up over the last few years.

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Love,
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Chapter 1

Literature Review

Introduction

The current conversation around digital content moderation is largely focused on Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. The conversation swirls incessantly between the need to eliminate Section 230, the need to reform Section 230, and the need to protect Section 230 at all costs. The landscape of digital networks today is drastically different than it was when computer bulletin board systems (BBSs) were the main source of civilian networking, but examining this time before Section 230 provided legislated immunity to internet service providers will allow us to, at a minimum, stop myopically focusing on legal forces as the only thing that can regulate a conversation in cyberspace.

Historical research around early computer networks contains a unique tension between feast and famine. While looking for literature within academia for critical analysis of computer bulletin board systems, one is met with almost exclusively no information save for a paragraph or two recognizing the network's existence. Kevin Driscoll is one of the only scholars doing work to recontextualize alternative early computer networks. Because there is so little existing literature on the subject, each interview and archival document I've found has felt like a feast of information. Even when I'm unsure of exactly what to do with the information, there's a euphoria of discovery in which I have to stop and tell someone about a cool new (admittedly mundane in the grand scheme of things) fact I've learned.

While there is little critical conversation around alternative early networks, the conversation around content moderation and digital governance is bountiful. This

literature review will first survey work that is being done to contextualize digital speech's role in the broader public discourse. Then, I will discuss scholarship around digital content moderation and platform governance. Finally, I will review historiographical works that will help situate my research within the contemporary conversation surrounding content moderation and platform governance.

Digital Speech and Public Discourse

The process of deciding what expression can or cannot be said in the United States has always been difficult and evolving. Throughout the course of the 20th century, court cases constantly refined and reinterpreted the bedrock of the First Amendment. (Bollinger and Stone 2019). Now, as Kate Klonick would say, there are New Governors of expression.

Jack Balkin states that, "At the very moment that our economic and social lives are increasingly dominated by information technology and information flows, the First Amendment seems increasingly irrelevant to the key free speech battles of the future." This irrelevance of the First Amendment comes about not because the functions of freedom of expression in a democratic society, but rather because the key decisions concerning free expression in the future will be those of "technological design, legislative and administrative regulations, the formation of new business models, and the collective activities of end-users" (Balkin, 2009).

The primary locus of speech and expression control is moving away from courtroom arguments and into the realm of tech policy and corporate decision making. While the government in the United States derives its "just powers from the consent of the governed" and thus can be challenged by the citizenry, these avenues of challenging

decision making become limited when private actors control speech. These private actors -- these new governors -- are the operators of websites that store, process, organize, and present information created by billions of users around the world.

Traditional regulatory metaphors and analogies do not work in this digital age, and thus, alternatives are needed. Building largely off of Lessig's framework of understanding regulation in cyberspace as a whole, Kate Klonick argues that "to best understand online speech, we must abandon traditional doctrinal and regulatory analogies and understand these private content platforms as systems of governance" (Klonick 2017, 1599). Platforms should be seen as the New Governors of speech that are "private, self-regulating entities that are economically and normatively motivated to reflect the democratic culture and free speech expectations of their users." Content moderation is seen as a task that curates a normative reflection of American free speech norms as a matter of economic necessity (Klonick 2017, 1603).

The arrival of new governors compounds the recognition of new harms. Certain types of speech that would not be available, or would certainly be outside the norms of protected speech in real life, become readily achievable in cyberspace, where anonymity allows users to escape the norms of society in which they live to conduct action in a different set of norms in cyberspace (Lessig 2006; Citron 2014). This escape can be liberating in certain instances, such as when queer kids are able to leave oppressive communities around where they live to experience open, affirming communities online, but this anonymity can provide an opportunity for pervasive cyber harassment. Danielle Citron defines cyber harassment as "often understood to involve the intentional infliction of substantial emotional distress accomplished by online speech that is persistent enough

to amount to a “course of conduct” rather than an isolated incident (Citron 2014). This type of behavior is particularly important to examine when looking at how to create beneficial public discourse in digitally mediated social spaces. Legally, cyber harassment is often permissible within the United States because of defenses that the speech is all just speech and never meant to be anything more than imaginative expression. However, this speech is detrimental to the public discourse because it chills the speech of those targeted. Free Speech doctrine has traditionally been seen not as “a good in itself but a means of securing other important values” (Franks, 2019). The freedom to speak is key for 1) the assurance of individual self-fulfillment, (2) a means of attaining the truth, (3) a method of securing participation by the members of a society in social decisions, and (4) a method of achieving balance between stability and change (Emerson 1963). When the right for an individual to speak freely is viewed as a right in and of itself rather than a means to an end, hate speech and targeted harassment become protected speech. However, hate speech and other types of targeted harassment can encroach upon the collective ability for people to practice free speech, especially online where there is more opportunity for “unanswerable” speech (Franks, 2019). In fact, cyber harassment can be more profoundly damaging than physical harassment (not that the two are always separate) because the internet increases the life of harassment, creates a larger audience for the harassment, and allows for harassment by proxy (Citron 2014, 4- 5).

Section 230

The ability for contemporary platforms to be self-regulating, private governors of speech is in large part due to § 230 of the Communications Decency Act (Klonick 2017; Kosseff 2019; Gillespie 2018). Jack Balkin notes in *The Future of Free Expression in a*

Digital Age, that free speech in the 20th century was expanded and protected by legal decisions, but in the 21st century, technology and information policy will be the determinants (Balkin, 2009). This shift in power is largely attributable to the wide amount of freedom that Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act gives to social media platforms. Section 230 states that “no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider. Basically, this removes liability from intermediaries for any user-generated content while also allowing the intermediaries to impose content regulation. This structure, in which platforms can moderate speech in any way they choose with no liability, creates a scenario in which users have no legal framework to challenge decisions made about their speech.

According to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, CDA 230 is the most important law protecting internet speech (Electronic Frontier Foundation). However, CDA 230 only works to protect speech when there is competition. Tarleton Gillespie notes that, “The early logic of content moderation, and particularly the robust safe harbor protections offered to intermediaries by U.S. law, makes sense in the context of the early ideals of the open web, fueled by naïve optimism, a pervasive faith in technology, and single-minded entrepreneurial zeal” (Gillespie 2018, 54). Without competition in social media communities, as we’re seeing now, CDA 230 protects the private monopoly control of speech. Instead of the governors of speech being democratically accountable people and organizations, they are private entities (MacCarthy 2019).

Klonick “argues that platforms have created a voluntary system of self-regulation because they are economically motivated to create a hospitable environment for their

users in order to incentivize engagement” (Klonick 2017, 1615). Even though platforms are free to regulate as little as they wish (in the United States), they still invest resources in moderation because they are economically motivated to keep users on their platforms. Klonick “concludes that three main factors influenced the development of these platforms’ moderation systems: (1) an underlying belief in free speech norms; (2) a sense of corporate responsibility; and (3) the necessity of meeting users’ norms for economic viability“ (Klonick 2017, 1617-1618).

Online commercial services and internet platforms were slow to realize how dramatically speech governance intersected with their work. Mostly, the companies simply viewed themselves as software companies who wanted to get involved with the activity of users as little as possible. As platforms began to recognize the importance and necessity for moderation within their company structures, they often brought on “American lawyers trained and acculturated in American free speech norms and First Amendment law” to create their company content-moderation policies (Klonick 2017, 1620 - 1622). Thus, the groundwork for content-moderation policies was built upon cultures steeped in American Free Speech norms.

Platform Governance

Is the internet a space? Does the sovereignty and jurisdiction of actions on the internet mirror that of the embodied world? When someone does something online, are they doing it where their body is, or is the act “done” where the server lives? A dominant mythology of early cyberspace was that cyberspace was a place that could not be regulated. However, this reasoning was logically false as it mistook the way things were in a novel situation as how they had to be. Different networks allow different forms of

regulation; differences in the software and hardware that create the network create different levels of regulability in different networks (Lessig 2006, 31-34). As work from Danielle Citron and others have revealed, online activities and behaviors are not strictly confined to cyberspace. The destruction of this binary is important, and it underscores the confusion around how to regulate activity in cyberspace.

In 1999, when Lawrence Lessig originally wrote *Code*, the book served as a counter to the dominant idea that the internet was inherently unregulable. Lessig followed *Code* with *Code 2.0* in 2006 as a “translation” that allowed his initial work to remain applicable in a swiftly changing world. Lessig’s works are some of the founding texts on the discussion of regulation of cyberspace. The main argument of Lessig’s book is that “Some architectures of cyberspace are more regulable than others; some architectures enable better control than others. Therefore, whether a part of cyberspace—or the Internet generally—can be regulated turns on the nature of its code” (Lessig 2006, 24). This description of cyberspace architecture explains that the code that creates cyberspace can be changed to encourage, ban, or make impossible certain behaviors. Lessig goes on to describe the four forces of regulation we can consider when trying to govern behavior: (1) law, (2) market, (3), norms, and (4) architecture, or code (Lessig 2006, 123-124).

Regulability of behavior presupposes architectures of identity, so we must look at how identity is constructed within different networks (Lessig 2006, 46). Lessig writes that “to make sense of the technologies we use to identify who someone is, consider the relationship among three familiar ideas — (1) “identity,” (2) “authentication,” and (3) “credential” (Lessig 2006, 39). Without the ability to tie an action to an identity, that action is incredibly hard to regulate. Thus, the design of certain cyberspaces that do not

have architectures of identity built them give each of the users a “Ring of Gyges” which, as Lessig writes, “Plato reports in *The Republic*, made Gyges the shepherd invisible. The dilemma for regulation in such a world is precisely the fear Plato had about this ring: With such a ring, ‘no man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice’” (Lessig 2006, 59).

Content Moderation

Sarah Roberts defines content moderation as “the organized practice of screening user-generated content (UGC) posted to Internet sites, social media and other online outlets, in order to determine the appropriateness of the content for a given site, locality, or jurisdiction.” Roberts mostly analyzes contemporary content moderation in a commercial context, as a piece of the “social media production chain,” but she also emphasizes that content moderation has always been a part of the social internet. Within text-based online areas, like BBSs, MUDs, and other commercial services, “mechanisms to enact moderation were other direct and visible to the user.” This type of overt, community-driven moderation is different from commercial content moderation at scale that endeavors to monitor and moderate content with labor that is at an “organizational arm’s length from the platforms they moderate” (Roberts 2017).

Digital content moderation is hard to execute and even harder for a layperson to grasp. Moderators are tasked with making decisions that can inhibit one’s ability to communicate online, and users are burdened with uncertainty about what can and cannot be posted. Tarleton Gillespie, in his book *Custodians of the Internet* summarizes why digital content moderation is so hard: (1) Digital content moderation is resource intensive and relentless; (2) The decisions regarding what should be moderated are difficult and

nebulous; (3) No one knows what the standards should be; and (4) One failure is all it takes for grave consequences (Gillespie 2018, 9-10).

Gillespie writes that “articulating the rules is the clearest opportunity for platforms to justify their moderation efforts as legitimate” (Gillespie 2018, 45). The two main documents that platforms use to communicate their rules with users are the “terms of service,” which is usually a legal contract that details user behavior as one topic among others such as intellectual property and liability, and a document called “community guidelines” or something with a similar title. The community guidelines, in “deliberately plainspoken language, lays out the platform’s expectations of what is appropriate and what is not” (Gillespie 2018, 46). Gillespie details that the community guidelines communicate more than what is written in that the community guidelines must communicate the attitude and identity of a site. Community guidelines are performative documents that reveal how platforms deal with the tension of heralding free speech and open internet ideals while needing to create moderated spaces: “if platforms are supposed to offer anything better than the chaos of the open web, then oversight is central to that offer—moderation is the key commodity, and must be advertised in the most appealing terms” (Gillespie 2018, 47).

Gillespie recognizes several common areas of problematic content that most prominent platforms cover in their community guidelines: sexual content (nudity, sex and pornography), graphic content (violence and obscenity), harassment (abuse, trolling and direct threats), hate speech, illegal activity, self-harm, real names, commercial activity, and quality contributions. Gillespie also makes the point that, while platform moderators like to “think that their guidelines already represent the values of users, and are

responsive to shifting norms and practices,” many policies codified within community guidelines are only created after a scandal or public outrage over a failure of moderation - every traffic light is a tombstone (Gillespie 2018, 67).

While discussing why platform community guidelines are important, Gillespie says, “platforms adjust their guidelines in relation to one another, and smaller sites look to larger ones for guidance, sometimes borrowing language and policies wholesale.” Thus, the decisions of one platform within its content policies are not entirely isolated from one another.

One of the strongest regulatory forces acting upon current social media platforms is that elusive, mythical invisible hand of the market:

Still, from an economic perspective, all this talk of protecting speech and community glosses over what in the end matters to platforms more: keeping as many people on the site spending as much time as possible, interacting as much as possible. But even in this sense, platforms face a double-edged sword: too little curation, and users may leave to avoid the toxic environment that has taken hold; too much moderation, and users may still go, rejecting the platform as either too intrusive or too antiseptic. (Gillespie 2018, 28)

As the user base broadens, network effects create more value for the members of the network, but new members bring in different norms, expectations and ideas (Benkler 2006). This introduction of new people who have differing expectations for what should and should not be allowed to happen in a network creates an increasingly difficult task for the entity in charge of moderation as the moderator has a growing list of priorities and expectations to juggle when choosing moderation guidelines.

Social patterns change when translated to digital spaces because the spaces are designed to facilitate certain communications and actions (Lessig 2006). People can communicate and interact within the boundaries of the affordances of the platform on

which they operate. However, Gillespie points out that people push against these boundaries, and that it is easy to overstate the influence of architecture as “straightforward and muscular” (Gillespie 2018, 34).

Robyn Caplan has categorized platform content moderation strategies into three groups depending on factors like the scale of the platform’s operation. (1) The artisanal approach is a tactic in which around 5 to 200 workers govern content moderation decisions on a case-by-case basis. Most social media sites begin their moderation with this approach, and then are forced to adapt the process as a case-by-case scale becomes overwhelming. (2) The community-reliant approach, seen on sites like Wikipedia and Reddit, combines formal policy made at the company level with volunteer moderators from the site’s community. (3) Finally, the industrial approach is the model Facebook uses, in which “tens of thousands of workers are employed to enforce rules made by a separate policy team. (Caplan 2018). At all levels, platform content moderation must deal with a tension between context sensitivity and consistency, and accept different trade-offs between the two.

Content Moderation and Scale

A central issue to contemporary issues of content moderation is scale. Scale can either be viewed as a blessing or curse for content moderation efforts. The contemporary uproar around free speech and content moderation on the internet speaks volumes to the fact that content moderation is a competition issue. We are only having conversations about the shifting power over speech from governments to the social media platforms because they have gained a monolithically pervasive status in our lives. If someone doesn’t like the content moderation decisions on Facebook, they could theoretically make

their own blog on the internet as an alternative, but that does not supply the same affordances of using a social media site.

Klonick points to the impact that social media can have on civic action through the example of livestream video on social media of police brutality being used as a catalyst for countrywide political movements. The precarity of this power is given to platforms because monopolistic platforms could just as easily have deleted that push towards civic movement if they decided the livestreams needed to be moderated off of their platforms (Klonick 2017, 1600).

The issue of Facebook holding dominion over what speech can be allowed on a dominant global network was one of the main arguments Facebook's co-founder Chris Hughes brought up in his now infamous *New York Times* op-ed, "It's Time to Break Up Facebook." Hughes summarizes the issue of Facebook's monopoly power over digital speech without frills: "The most problematic aspect of Facebook's power is Mark's unilateral control over speech. There is no precedent for his ability to monitor, organize and even censor the conversations of two billion people (Hughes 2019).

At the Knight First Amendment Institute's symposium, "The Tech Giants, Monopoly Power, and Public Discourse," in November 2019 at Columbia University I was first exposed to Evelyn Douek's idea that platform monopolization was not an entirely bad deal for the health of public discourse. If these cartels are about to be the dominant governors of online speech, we ought to build structures that allow these cartels to leverage the plausible benefits of their reach and size for the good of the public discourse.

Douek argues that “Collaboration between tech platforms on especially intractable problems allows us to break free of the false dichotomy between too few online gatekeepers holding too much power, on the one hand, and a fragmented online public sphere constituted by multiple fiercely competitive platforms, on the other.” And in turn, she names these collaborations content cartels, or “arrangements between platforms to work together to remove content or actors from their services without adequate oversight. These come in various guises; they can be demanded, encouraged, participated in, or unheeded by regulators. But they share the characteristic that they compound the existing lack of accountability in platform content moderation” (Douek 2020). Douek engages with the idea that content cartels might be good so long as they “keep a broader sense of the public interest” at their core so that the conversation about platform power and public discourse can move beyond being a dichotomous issue.

Content moderation did not always exist at such a scale. As previously mentioned, content moderation has been an aspect of digital networked communication from its inception. Until recently, the content moderation efforts on alternative computer networks were often distilled to a one-paragraph summary that basically only confirmed their existence. Work from scholars like Kevin Driscoll aims to change that.

Driscoll recently began the process of documenting and classifying the ways in which digital community moderation efforts began on bulletin board systems. Moderation on Bulletin Board Systems was largely the responsibility of individual sysops who built the BBS, and thus, each Bulletin Board System could choose to moderate its community in its own way. Driscoll recognizes four different moments at which sysops could exercise their power: (1) recruiting new users, (2) registration and

orientation, (3) cultivating regular callers, and (4) promoting users to the role of “co-sysops” (Driscoll 2019).

Historiography of the Net

Jonathan Sterne’s essay “The Historiography of Cyberculture” uses the example of sound to discuss certain assumptions and prejudices that have developed in the vague, emerging field of cyber cultural studies. “Sound is, pardon the pun, a blind spot of cyberculture historiography,” he says. In saying this, Sterne is drawing attention to certain ways in which the developing field of cyberculture studies has been collapsed into the preexisting model of visual studies, even though that visual perspective is only one of the myriad components of cybercultural artifacts (Sterne 2006, 19-21).

Sterne warns against the rush to periodize: “We should treat the historical periods in our writing less like self-evident categories in our data and more like problems to be considered and debated. We should place object construction at the very center of our intellectual project” (Sterne 2006, 24). Cybercultural scholarship is at the beginning stages of object construction, and the field should not be afraid of doing a bit of “navel gazing” before rushing into the adoption of pre-existing problems, narratives, and “ossified methods.” This problematic rush to periodize can be seen when looking at scholarly histories of the internet.

Scholarly histories of the internet often trace the development of the TCP/IP packet switching network formerly known as ARPANET into the modern internet (Abbate 1999; Campbell-Kelly 2014). The boundaries of internet history are drawn around the protocols of networked communication. Similar to how the broader history of computation is often periodized into digital and analog, internet histories often contain a

similar semantic categorization around network protocols that work to separate networks and technologies that might otherwise overlap.

Abbate brings up the rise of personal computing and local area networks toward the end of their internet history narratives to explain the rapid growth that the internet underwent in the late 1980s and 1990s. The normative behaviors and expectations of these distributed networks is not discussed. Abbate says that “ARPA managers Cerf and Kahn permitted and encouraged contract sites to connect their LANs to the Internet. This would have been a rather extraordinary move for a commercial network; however, ARPA was not in the business of selling Internet service, so its managers had no incentive to restrict access for economic purposes.” These distributed personal and microcomputer networks are used to explain some of the design choices of the internet that made the internet the dominant computer network (Abbate 1999, 186-187).

Recently, work from scholars like Joy Lisi Rankin and Kevin Driscoll have challenged the linear storytelling around the internet’s history. In her book, *A People’s History of Computing in the United States* Rankin says, “In that story, Americans didn’t gain the full promise and potential of personal computing until they could access the Internet during the 1990s. This popular myth nods to the early-1970s genesis of the ARPANET as the origins for American computer networking, and it traces a tidy path from the nascent network sponsored by the Defense Department’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) to the Internet of today. That mythology is all wrong” (Rankin 2018, 107). Rankin uses the demand and enthusiasm for time-sharing utilities at MIT, Dartmouth, and Carnegie Mellon between 1965-1975 to show an existing desire for communities with similar interests to engage via computer networking.

Most internet histories focus on technical innovations to draw boundaries and periods, but as Kevin Driscoll says, “when anyone other than a network engineer talks about the Internet, he or she is rarely thinking about such things. For most folks, the Internet is principally a medium through which we chat with friends, share pictures, read the news, and do our shopping.” That is to say, the internet is a cultural object that expands beyond the boundaries of its technical artifacts. The beginnings of the internet as a medium for social life came from microcomputer hobbyists of the 1970s and 1980s as they created Bulletin Board Systems, or BBSs (Driscoll 2016).

Conclusion

If we view the history of the internet as an object-oriented history following the path of ARPANET and TCP/IP protocols, the role of content moderation within digital communities seems like a new concept that sprang into existence when the internet was made commercial and allowed users outside of academia and government to access its tubes. In this viewing, digital content moderation has always been negotiated within cyberspaces that were commercialized. However, if we look at alternate network histories, we see that the role of digital content moderation began being negotiated far earlier in Bulletin Board Systems, Usenet and AOL. Before the New Governors, there were the Old Puppet Masters.

Chapter 2

Methods

How the Work Was Approached

This project analyzes the history of content moderation on a pre-platform, pre-Section 230 alternative network -- BBSs -- using a mix of archival methods and oral history. Building off work like Driscoll's that complicates existing narratives of internet history through critical examination of Bulletin Board Systems, I wanted to expand on his examination of historical content moderation on BBSs. Where Driscoll recognized and classified different moments of intervention that system operators could take to moderate BBS communities, I wanted to expand on the normative forces that created these opportunities for intervention. Recognizing the messiness of computer network histories, the scope of my project does not have a definite temporal boundary. Roughly, my project starts with the creation of the BBS in 1978 and ends with AOL's discontinuation of their Community Leadership Program.

While most of my research focus was on Bulletin Board Systems, I also wanted to briefly examine some of the networks that followed. The phrase "followed" here is used not because BBSs linearly led to the creation of AOL and Usenet but because AOL and Usenet came after the creation of BBSs. To present the networks as periods in a linear progression would be a disservice to the convoluted threads of these networks' history. However, for the sake of narrative flow, there needs to be some form of organization.

I briefly look at AOL as a bookend of this story before the internet consumes all. I chose to close my research with a brief examination of another network to establish that the stories of BBSs do not live isolated to their technology. The negotiated ideas about

content moderation and network governance did not cease to exist in time once other networks sprang forth.

Archival Documents

Because there are no institutional collections dedicated to Bulletin Board Systems, a lot of my time was spent digging through whatever I could find. Luckily, several hobbyists have created extensive digital archives to chronicle the time of early networked computation. Unfortunately, “I hungrily searched every corner of the internet as thoroughly as I could” is not yet a formalized method, so allow me to walk you through some of the minutiae of my archival journey.

Many of my searches began in the digital halls of the Internet Archive. The Internet Archive began as an archive of the internet itself, and grew to contain myriad digital resources. The Internet Archive is a digital repository of web pages, books and texts, audio recordings, videos, images, and software programs. Unique about the Internet Archive is that anyone with a free account can upload media to the archive. Because there are no formalized archives dedicated to BBS computing, the Internet Archives is the perfect location to find primary source material from the BBS days as former BBS operators and callers can upload whatever material they have to the Internet Archive. On the Internet Archive, I found material using pretty basic, broad search terms like “Bulletin Board System” and “BBS.” Once I typed in my search terms, I would then scan through every single piece of material uploaded to the internet archive. The reason that I kept my search terms so broad is because of a lack of material that exists directly discussing and analyzing content moderation efforts on these early networks. For example, no boolean combination of “Bulletin Board System/BBS and content

moderation” returns search results. Thus, most of my information from the Internet Archives was taken from scans of instructional books, popular magazines like “Boardwatch,” and scans of advertisements.

Sources from the Library of Congress were also gathered. Because a majority of this project was researched and written during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no ability for me to go to actual archives to view sources that were not yet digitized. Thus, my searches of the Library of Congress's catalog were always limited by the filter "available online." Future researchers might be interested to know that searches for Bulletin Board Systems turned up almost 100 different Federal Registers within the Library of Congress's catalog.

One of the most prolific sources of archived BBS literature and histories is a result of Jason Scott. Jason Scott is the founder of textfiles.com and the creator of BBS; The Documentary. Jason Scott, working with The Archive Team, won a National Digital Stewardship Alliance Innovation Award in 2013. I cannot stress enough how many of my searches either began or ended with labors of Jason Scott. Kevin Driscoll has also extensively examined materials available on textfiles.com.

Many of the oral histories archived on textfiles.com are celebratory and infused with a nostalgia for the good ol' days of BBSs. One of the authors of these histories, Dan / Basehead recognized the trend of sensationalized reminiscing as he wrote: "I also want to apologize for the dry, didactic tone of a good part of the file. I wanted to treat it more as a real history, and not another textfile where I just go on and on about how 'totally awesome!' everything was back then. I diverged into more anecdotal style as it goes on, but hey, I tried."

Originally, in my research plan, I was going to conduct in-person archival research at the National Museum of American History. After talking to Alana Staiti, Curator of the History of Computers and Information Sciences, she decided that there could be information relevant to my project’s scope in some uncatalogued pamphlets, user manuals, log books, trade literature, and magazines. However, as I previously mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic took away the ability to conduct any in-person archival research.

Oral Histories

Table 1 Oral history subjects and how they were sourced

Person	Who they Are	How I found them
Nell Minow	BBS Caller – multiple boards – began calling in 1986	Bob Gellman
Mark Wrynn	Co-Sysop of Dark Tower BBS throughout 90s	I messaged him after he posted on the r/bbs subreddit
Ashley Irons	Known as Phantasm, the Sysop of Unauthorised Access BBS from 1990 - 1995	I messaged her in the “BBSing 2.0” Facebook group
Bob Gellman	Creator (and actual SysOp) of the Federal Whistleblower BBS	Dr. Meg Jones introduced me
Gregory McGill	Sysop of The KEEP BBS starting in 1982	I messaged him in the “BBSing 2.0” Facebook group.
Sam Simon	Sysop of the IDI BBS in the late 1980s	Nell Minow
Cathy Chandler	Moderator on AOL’s Star Trek Forum	I messaged her after seeing a post she made on a Reddit thread about AOL moderators
Harold Curtice	Moderator on AOL’s Star Trek Forum	Cathy Chandler

To collect oral histories from people who participated in BBSs, I found interested parties through word of mouth and via contemporary social media platforms. On Reddit.com, I found several threads in the subreddit r/bbs regarding prompts encouraging users to share memories from their days running or using bulletin board systems. I identified users who posted something that affirmed they either ran or used a bulletin board system. Then, I messaged those users on Reddit with a clear explanation of why I was messaging them and the extent of how their stories would be used if they offered to allow me to collect their oral histories.

Some of the users that I messaged on Reddit put me into contact with family or friends who also had relevant stories to tell me about their times on BBSs. I also joined several Facebook groups dedicated to BBSs and old computers, in which I posted a few calls for people to share their stories with me. Additionally, within those Facebook groups, I privately messaged users who identified themselves as former or current sysops or BBS callers.

I was able to conduct a few of my oral histories in person before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the other conversations occurred over phone or email. While I prefer to conduct oral histories through phone or video call, many interested parties expressed that the pandemic made their schedules too hectic for call, and thus, several of my oral histories were collected asynchronously via email.

How Analysis Was Conducted

I chose to model my analysis off of work by Meg Jones and Dan Bouk. These scholars recognize the importance and epistemological validity of storytelling and human experience. The sources that I analyzed were largely first-person narratives because the

stories of early networked computation live within the memories and stories of the people who created and negotiated these networks. Both Jones and Bouk utilize primary sources in a way that tells a story that is anchored in historical authenticity. Additionally, I chose to buttress the archival material I analyzed with oral histories of people who used these networks.

Chapter 3

Research and Analysis

What are Bulletin Board Systems?

Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) were a form of networked computers that allowed anyone who owned “terminals or computers equipped with modems” to “call in to leave and retrieve messages.” Ward Christensen and Randy Suess conceived, designed, built and programmed the first Bulletin Board System over a thirty day period (January 16, 1978 to February 16, 1978) in Chicago as a means to generate material for their computer club’s newsletter (Christensen and Suess 1978). Before the commercialized internet was extant, BBSs allowed computer hobbyists (so long as their computer had a display, keyboard and modem) to dial into a system operator’s computer to view posts, download software, and play games.

The actual computer bulletin board was hosted on the system operator’s computer, and other computer hobbyists (so long as their computer had a display, keyboard, modem and connection to a phone line) could dial into the BBS. For many BBSs, the extent of the network infrastructure was the central computer on which the BBS was housed, and the phone lines connecting it to the computers of callers. As BBSs progressed, the infrastructure would include meta networks of BBSs, like the popular Fidonet, that allowed BBSs to act as nodes that connected disparate computers through the network. Bulletin Board Systems ranged from “simple message boards to sophisticated systems that offered software downloads, multi-topic bulletin boards, email, and even games” (Banks 2008, 46). Bulletin boards could either be general purpose gathering spaces or topic-driven destinations.

Unlike commercial online services, “more than 80 percent of bulletin boards are nonprofit; a third charge nothing at all” (Berck 1992). So, for most hobbyist bulletin boards, the main cost to the BBS caller was the cost of using a phone line to dial into a BBS. Because of this structure, BBSs often created local networks, as the price of long-distance calling turned BBS users away from cross-country calls. However, it is important to note that some Sysops did profit off their home-grown bulletin board system network. In a Chicago Tribune article, Kevin Behrans, the SysOp of Aquila BBS in Aurora, Illinois, after being asked if his board had made him into a millionaire yet, blushed and said that it had not yet but it was a definite possibility for him in the future. Aquila was a general-interest Bulletin Board that had 25 available lines at all times (Coates 1992).

Content Moderation = Community Formation

The contemporary discussion around content moderation and the function of speech online tends to focus on dichotomies of whether content is kept up or taken down. While the ultimate goal of these decisions to take down or keep up content is to create a community, as suggested by the “Community Guidelines” documents that govern the platforms’ decisions to remove certain categories of content, the actual labor of this community formation is what Sarah Roberts has coined Commercial Content Moderation. Commercial content moderation is often formulaic and treated as a step within social media’s supply chain (Roberts 2017). The idea is, as Caplan identified, platforms that contain user generated content can create some kind of formulaic system that boils down the act of content moderation to decisions over what stays on a network.

However, on BBSs, the practice of moderating content is driven mostly by the whims of the SysOp, and who is allowed access to the community.

The Fluidity of Code as a Regulatory Force

Code was less of a regulator on BBSs than norms and powerful sysop gatekeepers were the puppet masters of the community. When the walled gardens began to pop up, notably AOL in my research and analysis, code became more of a prominent regulator of action and expression within the network. Code was law still for Bulletin Board Systems, but Sysops could readily modify most of the "laws" that they were given.

Different commercial software packages gave sysops different levels of control over user discourse on their boards. Some bulletin board operating systems had built in content filters that could be switched on or off. The program Hermes II allowed the sysop to decide "whether a user can post, chat, send email, etc. Moreover, it allows the sysop to decide if the user can post or read anonymous messages, list users, change a message, or see upload info. Also, you can restrict any user below a certain age from accessing certain areas of your board." Commercial softwares like Hermes II gave moderators, the board's sysops, more tools with which to prune their board's discourse (Kuykendall 1994).

Many bulletin board operating systems were shareware and were available to be downloaded from other bulletin boards. Most of these softwares could be heavily modified to achieve the regulatory framework that a particular SysOp wanted (Rickard 1993). In fact, this personalization at the source code level of a BBSs operating system not only allowed for the SysOp to control how users had to identify themselves on the system, but also became an attraction in and of itself to callers. SysOps were constantly

updating their operating systems to display their mastery over the shaping of their digital world.

Not Platform Governance but Home Rules

Similar to how the contemporary definition of content moderation doesn't work to describe how content was moderated on Bulletin Board Systems, the contemporary concepts of platform governance don't work to describe how the systems were governed. Instead of viewing BBSs as public forums in which everyone is entitled to a say in how things are managed, BBSs were viewed as a SysOp's home turf.

An ad for Rusty n Edie's BBS in that recurred in several BBS Magazines reinforces both the feel of the BBS community as a home that welcomed visitors and the authority that came with valid identification. The major selling point for their BBS, Rusty and Edie declare, is that "when you call for the first time, you'll know what no amount of words can tell you, you are Home." The ad proclaims, "We live by the three no's: No Censorship, No Rules, No Hassle." While the ad claims a lack of censorship and rules as benefits of dialing the BBS, the operators also are sure to establish authentication for their own identities: "we post our address. We post our voice phone number" (Print Advertisement for "Rusty n Edie's BBS" 1994).

When discussing the proper behavior of BBS callers, the great deal of work and sacrifice that a sysop puts into creating a virtual space is stressed as justification for callers to listen to the whims of the sysop. "Consequently, I think it's important that one remembers they are a guest of the Sysop, visiting the Sysops home or place of business, and should conduct themselves accordingly. Even with a subscription or pay system, that notion still applies, and doesn't give license to leave one's manners at the door." Literally,

the digital space in which communication takes place on the bulletin board is seen as an extension of the SysOps home or office (Wright 1992).

Digital World Is the Real World

A common refrain from SysOps and callers was that the behavioral expectations for the physical world were the same for the digital world. Running counter to the dominant mythology of a disembodied world free from regulation that would appear as the internet became popular, there was little radical thought about divergent norms of civility and identity. Under one of the rules on The KEEP BBS, the SysOp says, "People sometimes have trouble determining whether certain activities are illegal. It's usually not that hard. If it's illegal "out there," it's illegal "in HERE"! Using our BBS to commit a crime doesn't make it any less a crime." Activity in cyberspace was not seen as fundamentally different from activity in physical reality, in fact, it was portrayed as an obvious truth that there should be no difference in physical and digital behavior (McGill 1997).

Further, real name policies were the dominant identification rule on most BBSs, ensuring that callers weren't automatically equipped with a Ring of Gyges when they dialed into a bulletin board. As Lessig said, establishing factors of identification is one of the most important steps in creating regulable behavior, and verifying identification was one of the first steps that users took before they could communicate on Bulletin Board Systems.

The emphasis on identification that matched someone's physical identification was ever present in the stories of Nell Minow. Nell, who thought that it was "adorable" that I referred to her experiences on BBSs just a few decades ago as history, was like

other early BBS users in that she had always been incredibly interested in staying up to date on computer literature. Nell was aware that there were instances of “cat fishing” and other risks that could occur on BBSs, but she decided to access a BBS through a computer at her office in 1986. Nell said that it was the norm of all boards that she visited that real names were what was expected from all callers. Even though Nell stayed on boards that expected true names, she still monitored what she would say depending on who she was talking to in fear of the ever-present catfish. Sysops had the power to verify and control who was allowed to contribute to the bulletin board, but users also had their own ways of figuring out who to talk to. While Nell navigated online communities, she often had to trust that SysOps were doing enough to verify users, but that trust was not always enough to assuage any suspicion. When talking about her experience as a woman in the late 1980s using male-dominated computer networks, Nell said that only one time “somebody was kind of aggressive” with her, “you know, a ‘what are you wearing kind of thing?’ And I just said ‘jeans and a sweatshirt.’ That was the end of that” (Nell Minow, telephone conversation with author, November 21, 2019).

But, before Nell trusted that the person she was talking to was who they said they were, Nell subjected them to an identity authentication check:

Oh, I’ll tell you one thing that was interesting back in those days was that I that women would sometimes not know if they were talking to another woman. And kind of the secret code for proving that you were female to other women, was there were two questions: One was what size panty hose do you wear? Because men don’t know what sizes panty hose come in. And they would say, like seven or something, which is not even a thing. And now, we don’t even have pantyhose anymore, but okay. And what’s the French manicure? (Nell Minow, telephone conversation with author, November 21, 2019)

Nell also told of certain times in which user-to-user identity verification wasn't successful on BBSs:

Well, you know, somebody once challenged me and said, I don't think you're really a woman because I don't know, there aren't that many women online, and I don't think you really are and, and I had literally just had a baby. I mean, I don't know how you can't feel more like a woman than somebody who's just had a baby. So, I said, 'Okay, I've got a baby. I don't know what else to tell you.'" (Nell Minow, telephone conversation with author, November 21, 2019)

User-to-user identity verification practices helped users trust the others in their bulletin board community, but they were imperfect, and often failed along gendered lines.

Nell's story revolves around the ability for her to contribute to the BBS community being linked to her comfort with knowing that she was talking to who she thought she was talking to. When I asked Nell how she identified on Bulletin Boards, she emphatically responded, "My real name. I don't monkey around with that...I was not a teenager, and I was a grown up, and I had no interest in being anything other than myself or meeting anybody who wanted to be something else" (Nell Minow, telephone conversation with author, November 21, 2019).

The local nature of BBSs also contributed to the expectations that conduct and speech on BBSs would remain no different than conduct in real life. Many of the conversations I had revealed that real connections and friendships formed among users of the same bulletin boards. The real life socialization, pizza parties, bowling, picnics, and meetings for coffee were some of the major draws for Nell Minow, Gregory McGill and Sam Simon.

Not all stories from this period about the real world and the digital world melding seamlessly are entirely jovial. During flame wars, which were mostly just callers yelling about which hardware or software was superior, the threats made on BBSs could

sometimes bleed into the physical world. Luckily, in the recount of one such occurrence, the stakes were not too high. A BBS caller by the name of Chickenhead tells a story of a time when their friend was ruthlessly flaming some PC-users. The PC users receiving the message decided to seek the flammers out to teach them a lesson IRL. Chickenhead recalls laughing “when these ‘die hards’ showed up at his door one day, revealing themselves to be a couple of 13-year-old skateboarders” (The BBS Universe from the Perspective...) While Chickenhead, the hero of the story, walked away unscathed, their story highlights the perilous balance of trust and identification that was in most instances required to communicate on BBSs.

SysOps Are the Puppet Masters

One of the first things to understand about Bulletin Board Systems is that the Sysop is the Puppetmaster creating reality and pulling the strings behind their computer. Sysops are puppet masters. Sysops are kings. Sysops are gods. These metaphors were repeated constantly, and they were repeated for good reason. On a technical level, SysOps had ultimate power over the bulletin board. They controlled what the rules were on the board. They controlled who was allowed to enter the board. They controlled how long callers could stay on their board. The sysop’s affinities and desires are one of the strongest influences over what kind of community develops on a Bulletin Board. In a sampling of BBSs, you can see that Sysops create bulletin boards to create different communities, sometimes centered around certain hobbies or cultures (Grote 1992).

Ashley Irons, aka Phantasm, the SysOp of Unauthorized Access BBS from 1990-1995 said, “I enjoyed creating logon screens, menus, uploading the files to the system, basically being in control of an online computerised word where I was king. Being a

Sysop gave me ultimate power. I created an online world on my bedroom computer and made it available for others to dial into. When I was a user before I became a SysOp, I looked up to these BBS operators in awe and admiration at the systems they had created” (Ashley Irons, emails with author, August 1, 2020).

Puppet Masters, but Kind Puppet Masters

From all fronts, a “good” sysop is one who will drop everything to serve their callers. Magazines, ads, BBS callers, and SysOps in their own words, when describing what makes a successful, good Sysop describe someone who is helpful, selfless, and civil. The SysOp is supposed to have the good of their callers as the top priority when making decisions about what to keep on their boards.

However, this sparkling selflessness is often waved as a sort of weapon or validation to remind callers that the SysOp is the Puppet Master of the whole board, and should be treated with respect and loyalty not because of their power over the entire system, but because they are selfless, kind, and sacrifice so much to create this home in cyberspace for their callers. In a description of what to do when calling a BBS for the first time, fealty to the sysop is stressed in an article written by Walt Ledbetter called "The ABCs of BBSing." The first step that is given when visiting a new BBS is to observe the rules posted. A caller is also supposed to send an introductory post to the board's sysop and also a thank you note. "As a first-timer you demonstrated good behavior by writing two messages to the sysop -- we really like callers to acknowledge us," the author of the article wrote. There are several ways to look at this: through the metaphor of the BBS as visiting someone's house and through the lens of the popular

story of a sysop creating their own board because they didn't like any of the other boards (Ledbetter 1994).

But, even though the SysOp as a God of a system feels like an ever-present comparison, first person accounts tend to paint them as benevolent gods. Nell Minow used deifying words when she described the first interaction with the SysOp of the first BBS she called.

My very first time so I'm, you know, trying to figure out how to navigate. And you know, this before the World Wide Web, this is MS DOS, everything is very, very primitive. And I was having a little trouble figuring out how to navigate around, it didn't have a mouse. You know, I was trying to figure out how to navigate the bulletin board and it was like God spoke all of a sudden, Sam Simon, who I did not know. He said, "Excuse me, I see that you're trying to your new here and that you're trying to navigate around my board. Let me just show you what you need to do." And it was just a great, and he was so kind and so friendly.... he really lived right near where I lived. And I ended up meeting him IRL, as we said, in those days. And he, you know, couldn't have been nicer. (Nell Minow, telephone conversation with author, November 21, 2019)

This is the story of so many callers and SysOps. A person who is new to the board is lifted up into the community of the board by the SysOp. One on one communication between new users and the boards SysOp helped create a community and educate the caller about what was expected on the board. In this way, the SysOp introduced themselves in a way that benevolently acknowledged that they were the Puppet Master of the operation.

Differing Expectations of Behavior

While larger normative trends and forces shaped the overall culture of who and what was allowed and expected on Bulletin Board Systems, there was little codified into the technology of the system that made these expectations universal on every bulletin board. It's important to underscore how disparate and unique bulletin boards could be.

While for most of the histories of BBSing refer to caller verification and real name policies, others refer to a BBS scene that seemed more sinister and edgy. Describing what pulled them into BBSing, a user called Basehead said "They had cool, dangerous names. Illegal stuff was available there. There was an attitude, a sinister nature, and a sense of mystery about the whole thing. Above all, it was just something new, and it sounded fun, and I dove headlong into it" ("Eight Years of Glory...") Obviously, this person's expectations for what a BBS should be are drastically different than what someone like Nell Minow would desire and expect out of a BBS. Thus, the largest goal of moderation on BBSs was cultivating a community that had relatively homogenous expectations about proper BBS behavior and conduct. One way SysOps attempted to coordinate homogenous communities was through the use of guideline documents.

The Part about Written Norms

There's a lack of structural transparency within BBSs. There were some charters and guidelines, similar to the Community Guidelines of contemporary social media platforms, that circulated among SysOps, but ultimately the decision of who and what to allow on a BBS was up to the sysop. To create some form of transparency, some Sysops chose to create a sysop diary that details any "changes the sysop has made in the BBS, where the BBS is headed and other information the users will find useful (Grote 1992).

One of the most prolific guideline documents was the "Ten Commandments of the RBBS." The archivist of textfiles.com's context for this file lets us know that having a commandments document like this one was a "great example of how attitude could turn a BBS from a place of fun to a stuffed-shirt, bland, unenjoyable piece of cardboard" (The Ten Commandments of RBBS).

RBBS-PC Rules.....

1. Thou shalt not overstay thy welcome. The connect time limit is 72 minutes -- total -- per day.
2. Thou shalt not use offensive language.
3. Thou shalt not use this BBS system to engage in or encourage acts of commercial software piracy.
4. Thou shalt not use this system to advertise products not related to personal computing.
5. Thou shalt not have more than one ad online at a time.
6. Thou shalt not use this system to advertise thy business, except by arrangement with the SYSOP.
7. Thou shalt not log on using silly names lest the SYSOP rise up and smite thee.
8. Thou shalt not clutter up the system with trivial messages which are not computer related.
9. If thou art a new user, thou shalt make every effort to find out how the system works through its built in HELP functions before bothering thy beloved SYSOP.
10. Thou shalt contribute software as well as take it.

Amen. (The Ten Commandments of RBBS)

Guiding behavioral documents were not found on every BBS, and when they were they were often just copied and pasted commandment documents or borrowed from a more legal-looking BBS. Notably, these documents did not provide many, if any, concrete examples of the behaviors or language that would cause a caller to be kicked from the conversation. The rules of conversation, even when there were written rules, still had to be negotiated with the SysOp.

There's also the omnipresent "SysOp is god" allegory in this commandment document underlining where the authority of this document comes from. The exact behavior and speech that is banned by these sorts of documents isn't stated, but the governor of who determines where these boundaries lie is obvious: The SysOp. Two sysops might have the same commandment included in their guidelines, "Thou shalt not use offensive language," but the two SysOps could easily interpret what is meant by

"offensive language" differently. Thus, there is no true transparency for the callers on the system, they have to earn that transparency by getting to know the thoughts and beliefs of the sysop. Even then, they are at the mercy of the SysOp's judgment.

Gregory McGill started his own BBS, The KEEP BBS, in 1982 because there were not many BBSs around him. His long-distance phone bill was getting to be too much, so he instead decided to build his own board with the hopes that callers would upload files to his board. While building his BBS, Gregory was also a caller for several boards in his area. Gregory found that he spent much more time on Baud Town BBS over the other BBS he would frequent, Playhouse, because “it had a better group of users and was moderated better.” Gregory found that “community really was formed by giving people a friendly and well moderated place to chat. Having someone moderating or sysop'ing that holds the group to a standard of behavior makes online life more enjoyable” (Gregory McGill, Facebook message to author, July 31, 2020). And so, as the puppet master of his own world, Gregory would shape the rules of his BBS to create a friendly, well-moderated place for people to chat.

For instance, on my BBS if you lashed out like they do on these systems now, you'd be booted off - same with baud town - if someone got abusive or aggressive online they would get warned and then if they didn't stop they'd be booted off, excluded from the community. I always held the standard that it is a private system, so there was always a standard for behavior online. It needed to stay friendly and respectful for the most part. And if someone turned into a jerk they would get a chance but straighten up, but anything illegal would be stopped immediately. Playhouse was not very well moderated so it turned into argument and fights too often, not really what i enjoyed to be around so i went somewhere more friendly and fun (Gregory McGill, Facebook message to author, July 31, 2020)

Gregory saw his responsibility as SysOp as one to create a good environment to chat. For this reason, The KEEP BBS had an extensive rule document. The guidelines for The

KEEP BBS were not much more specific than what Gregory said above. The rules basically all boiled down to “don’t be mean.”

RESPECT OTHER CALLERS

Feel free to express yourself, but do not do anything to injure or harm others. In particular, if you dislike someone else’s ideas, you can attack the ideas, but NOT the person.

Please refrain from insulting other callers. The KEEP is not a place to make anyone feel demeaned, threatened, or in any other way unwelcome. If we receive complaints about a caller’s behavior, that caller can be barred from the service entirely WITHOUT REFUND.

Remember that the views and opinions held by CALLERS and STAFF of this BBS are strictly their own, and are in no way to be construed as the opinions of the Sysop, or any other operator of this system. If anyone says or posts anything that you find objectionable you may either disagree with them (in a CIVILIZED manner), or simply ignore them.

THE MOST IMPORTANT RULE

Our Mission Statement says that we welcome people from ALL walks of life. This is a matter of integrity for us, and we HEAVILY enforce this rule. If you are a BIGOT and think that you’re going to spread your hate on or through our system, you are terribly wrong. We’ll delete you faster than you can blink. ;> Is that clear enough? “

NO SUCH THING AS FREEDOM OF SPEECH HERE

We want people to speak freely on our system. But if you misuse that freedom (by abusing others), we will restrict your access to the system without refund.

There is currently no profanity filter installed on The KEEP. However, if foul language becomes a problem here, it CAN be re-installed. We here at The KEEP have nothing against adult language from the mouths of adults when used discriminately. Unfortunately, some people aren’t so discriminating. We would like to foster a friendly, family atmosphere here, where any person of any persuasion or age would feel welcome.

To that end, please refrain from using excessive profanity. — Don’t be surprised if a STAFF Person or Sysop asks you to “tone down” rude or insulting language, or to take it to a PRIVATE area. (McGill 1997)

The rules on Gregory’s board were, on face value, rules that favored a collectivist interpretation of free speech. While we do not have a log of how these guidelines were practiced in actuality, the guidelines have a strong emphasis that each user’s actions have an impact on other user’s capability to enjoy and speak freely on the BBS. Later in the

rules, Gregory states, “A SURE way to get deleted or suspended is to ABUSE, BASH or in any other way HARASS other users, thereby affecting their online enjoyment. And you’d also get NO REFUND of unused time” (McGill 1997). Thus, Gregory viewed a properly moderated board as one on which a caller did not have to fear any form of harassment or attack. Notably, the rules don’t contain any concrete examples of what makes someone a bigot or what exactly a civilized conversation entails.

Mark Wrynn was a co-sysop of the Dark Tower BBS with his friend Jack in the early 1990s, said that the internal rule governing content decisions was “don’t be a dick.” Mark went on to recognize that the rule was supposed to express that the board was meant to be pretty lax, so long as everyone stayed within the boundaries of “not being a dick.” Mark said, “we all thought that was a cool way to phrase it, as edgy teens/young adults I suppose. :)” (Mark Wrynn, emails with author, July 21, 2020). The Dark Tower BBS was a pretty big board, running Major BBS software and 48 phone lines, so the vagueness of their guiding content policy sometimes involved lengthy conversations in internal boards about how to rule on certain callers’ behavior. Wrynn also described how sometimes certain users avoided having the board’s “don’t be a dick” rule enforced equally if they were in the “inner circle” with the other SysOps (Mark Wrynn, emails with author, July 21, 2020). This inconsistency of enforcement highlights that even when boards had written guidelines or doctrines for user behavior, there was little clarity or specificity about what exactly was allowed on the board and who was allowed to say certain things.

Highlighting the fact that SysOps were in control of how much regulation could occur on Bulletin Board Systems is Bob Gellman’s story. Bob Gellman, while working

for Rep. Bob Wise (D-W.Va.) on the House Government Operations Committee, set up a bulletin board system to help federal employees report waste, fraud and other abuse to congressional investigators. Gellman established the board in a way that eschewed what seems to have been the established norms of calling to verify a caller's identity. Instead, Bob set-up a board on which any person with a computer and modem could call in without leaving any personal identifying information to leave a whistleblower complaint. It would seem that the bulletin board system was the perfect tool to usher in a new age of radical anonymity for whistleblower complaints. Whistleblowers did not even need to use their real name when calling the system to whistleblow to the House Government Operations Committee about federal fraud or abuse of power.

But, as Gellman pointed out, it just didn't work because there are so many other facets that go into a technology and the use of like accessibility and knowledge of the technology that contribute to the technology success it's not just being introduced into a vacuum. Gellman recognized that the technological affordances of a Bulletin Board System - namely the ability for a potential whistleblower to make an anonymous complaint - made the system an ideal innovation to gather complaints. However, The Federal Whistleblower BBS was more than anything created as a stunt to impress a boss. Gellman explained:

I worked on Capitol Hill from 1977 to 1994. So, I was very familiar with the hill. I was familiar with bulletin boards. And at one point, my chair - the chair of my subcommittee was a guy named Bob wise from West Virginia he later became governor for one term. and moved on from that and You know, you're always looking to do something to get your boss some attention, some publicity, some press, whatever, that's part of the game, and so I knew how to do bulletin boards. And I kind of I never really wanted to run a bulletin board personally. But there was readily available bulletin board software that you would download and you would stick on a machine and you put it on a phone line and you would configure

the software to do what you wanted. And the people who had written that software made that all relatively easy to do.

And so, I got this idea for a whistleblower bulletin board, and Wise agreed to it and I set it up. And you know, we publicized it some. We didn't get a lot of attention for it. We didn't get a lot of traffic. We got some and the idea was we were one subcommittee, there were six or seven other subcommittees at the time - five or six other subcommittees. And if we got anything that looked forward going, I would take it to one of the other subcommittees and offer it to them as a subject of investigation. And basically, we hardly ever got anything that was worth looking at. And the few times that we did, and I took it in one of the other subcommittees. They kind of looked at me blankly and said, yeah, thanks and nothing ever happened. (Bob Gellman, telephone conversation with author, November 13, 2019)

When thinking about the possibility of a networked communication system that offered anonymity from the vantage point of an always-connected present with a surveillant internet, it's hard to imagine how the Federal Whistleblower BBS wasn't revolutionary during its time. Viewing the BBS as a system that requires (1) a knowledge of hobbyist computer networking before the commercialized internet and (2) a computer with a modem when only around 9 million people in the United States had personal computers with modems illuminates that BBSs had impediments that made them inaccessible to a mass audience (Coates 1992). Normative and market forces ensured that access to the conversations on Bulletin Boards were kept to a relatively small audience. Gellman explained that the:

BBS world, you know, hadn't broken into popular consciousness. Your average run of the mill bureaucrat probably didn't know what they were - nobody else in my office, for example, not that it's representative of anything - had any idea what I was doing when I was sitting on the computer doing all this stuff. They weren't hobbyists. I mean, that's who did this stuff. None of them would have had any idea what was going on and the whole bulletin board world was just below public consciousness. (Bob Gellman, telephone conversation with author, November 13, 2019)

You Must Be This Technologically Minded to Ride This BBS

One factor that cannot be stressed enough that contributed to the conversation on BBSs is the insularity of the community. There's a lens of nostalgia in the oral histories I gathered and examined, and this nostalgia often references the closeness of community that was able to form on the BBSs. The relative smallness of the BBS community was largely a result of the technological gulch that one had to leap to be able to operate a bulletin board system. Thinking back on what made the heyday of bulletin boards so special, Net Mask writes "BBS's always seemed kind of laid back, and maybe even cozy is the word for it. It also could be, because everyone in their brother weren't using them. Only a select few who could actually operate their modem, and a term program. They weren't as easy, and certainly weren't as pretty as the 'Internet'" (NET MASK 1999).

This difficulty of knowledge required to access is referenced time and time again, whether through a literal declaration of the difficulty, or by stating that someone was always fervently interested in computing. Ezra Shapiro, the then West Coast Bureau Chief of BYTE Magazine, said on an episode of *The Computer Chronicles*, "all this stuff is confusing, and it takes a lot of time working with manuals and trying to figure it out particularly because most of the bulletin board systems are public domain software. They're not very well documented," He went on to say, "Look at the number of things you're trying to link together: you've got the software, the computer, the cable to the modem, the modem, the phone system, the satellite stuff that goes from one phone location to another phone location, and possibly very different combination of modem and computer at the other end, so you're dealing with a lot of elements here." Shapiro's offer of advice to bridge this octopus of confusion so that the viewer at home could begin

BBSing was to “Join a local computer club or users group. There’s always someone there who has paved the way a few months earlier” (Shapiro 1985). So, one of the main ways of gaining the requisite knowledge to access this community was to join a local computer club. This form of knowledge transmission excluded people who aren’t welcome for whatever reason to participate in the club. Additionally, the accessibility of this knowledge could largely depend on if there was a computer club geographically close to you. On top of needing specialized knowledge to understand how to access BBSs, Nell Minow pointed out that “you also wouldn’t get online if you weren’t comfortable expressing yourself in writing. And so, people tended to be pretty, pretty educated” (Nell Minow, telephone conversation with author, November 21, 2019).

What Is AOL?

In contrast to the esoteric nature of hobbyist bulletin boards, America Online centered its goals around making connection to its online services cheap and accessible. (Nollinger 1995). AOL became the online service for the everyday person, and the content on the service reflected that. Stephen Case, the CEO credited for making AOL a behemoth of the online service provider, said in a 1995 interview in *Wired* “Every day, I wake up and say, How can we make America Online more interesting, more useful, more fun, more affordable, so that it will attract a broader audience?” (Nollinger 1995). From its beginning, AOL focused on creating a network that was accessible to people who had various levels of computer expertise. AOL aimed to open networked digital communication to a broader audience with no computer clubs required.

As I’ve discussed, a large pattern of behavior in the BBS community was that if a caller didn’t like the rules of a BBS, they could leave that BBS for another. If they

couldn't find another BBS that they liked, they could just go start their own. If the SysOp didn't like the coded architecture of the BBS, they could alter it to create a modified version of the software. There were always alternatives for someone to explore to achieve a similar medium of communication. However, when AOL and other massive commercial online services began to dominate, users really only had two choices if they didn't like the rules of the network: (1) leave (2) deal with it.

Cathy Chandler and Harold Curtice

Cathy Chandler was a moderator in AOL's Community Leader Program from "around April or May of 1997 until when they shut down the moderator program." Cathy was a moderator on the Star Trek Forum in AOL, and the excitement and enjoyment she had for that time of her life dripped off of everything she had to share with me during our conversations. Cathy said that during her time moderating the Star Trek forums on AOL, she never had to deal with anything too rowdy or controversial. Even still, to prepare to be a moderator, Cathy went through standardized moderator training:

The Community Leader program was very well established by the time I was involved. It had a pretty nice virtual setup - you had to take online training prior to receiving moderator tools, and you had to take tests as part of those classes in order to pass into moderator status. It was a well-oiled machine with an entire staff devoted to educating and leading the training process. Once you received and passed your training tests, you were given moderator privileges and were assigned a mentor for your specific boards (although I am not sure if that was an official AOL policy or just a Trek board policy) who watched posts with you and was available for questions if there were posts that were borderline and may hit a gray area. I was paired with someone for several weeks, and that person introduced me on the boards where I was assigned as a new moderator. (Cathy Chandler, emails with author, July 5, 2020)

The classes that moderators took included digital tests that were scored "almost immediately, and if you didn't meet a certain mark, you had to take the test again. Once

your basic classes were complete, you unlocked another level of classes. Wash, rinse, repeat.” After going through training, as a mid-level mod, Cathy could hide other users’ posts if they clearly violated AOL’s terms. While she can’t remember all of what these clear violations were because she never had to “go that far with people,” Cathy gave the examples of “potential pedophiles, clear personal attacks, etc.” Mostly, Cathy sent templated messages as warnings to users who seemed like they were menacing to the overall health of the board (Cathy Chandler, emails with author, July 5, 2020). Harold Curtice, who was also a moderator on the AOL Star Trek forums said that he could delete posts as a low-level mod, but only more senior mods could ban or suspend users. Harold would delete seriously offensive posts and then send letters “to the senior mods and onto AOL and they would decide if the person was worthy of a 'time out' for a bit, or if they were repeat offenders, longer time outs or banning from areas” (Harold Curtice, emails with author, July 13, 2020).

There's a heavy theme of structure and reproducibility in every moderation element that Cathy and Harold described. Education for moderators was based on structured examples in which there were certain answers that were right and certain answers that were wrong, communication between the mods and those who violated guidelines was done through templates. This makes sense when considering that AOL's market position was to be easy and accessible to all. If a caller on a BBS didn't understand the expectations regulating speech on one board, they could just hop to a different board or become a puppet master of their own digital world. Such an outcome would be unsavory to AOL. From the start, AOL had a massively scalable community in

its sights, and as Caplan noted, content moderation at scale often needs to resemble a factory.

Areas of Future Research

The volume of BBS archival material that is academically unexamined is staggering. Jason Scott's digital archive, textfiles.com, has hundreds of documents that I didn't even open within the scope of this project. There are so many questions about this time that are still unanswered or unexamined.

In the future, one could further investigate the transition from hobbyist networks to the commercialized internet and how that solidified certain structures of moderation. Kate Klonick has discussed how the new governors created their content policy teams with lawyers versed in first amendment law, but how did earlier commercial networks create these policies? As I've discussed, the histories of networked computer communications are intertwined and not exactly linear. That being said, attempting to trace several networks through time with start points before the commercialization of the internet and the passage of CDA 230 could help to illustrate how these two events impacted regulatory forces on content moderation.

Finally, how did hacking disrupt existing social dynamics within BBS communities? SysOps held the power and control of information over everything that happened on their boards, so what happened when the puppet master turned into a marionette?

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Content moderation was viewed more as an act of community formation than through the lens of balancing censorship and free speech rights. SysOps were the puppet masters who had ultimate control over how code and normative forces could regulate the content and community that was allowed on their bulletin boards. Each BBS could be entirely different depending on the whims of the SysOp, but many BBSs treated the expectations of speech and civility as directly analogous to having real people in one's home. While many BBSs shared community guidelines and commandment documents that served as a guiding direction for what type of content was allowed on the bulletin board system, these documents were often lacking in any specific content recommendations and left the interpretation of what violated the guidelines up to the SysOp.

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