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"Blockbotting Dissent": Publics, Counterpublics, and Algorithmic Public Sphere(s)

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Abstract

In 2014, at the height of gamergate hostilities, a blockbot was developed and circulated within the gaming community that allowed subscribers to automatically block upwards of 8,000 Twitter accounts. "Ggautoblocker," as it was called, was designed to insulate subscribers' Twitter feeds from hurtful, sexist, and in some cases deeply disturbing comments. In doing so it cast a wide net and became a source of considerable criticism from many in the industry and games community. During this time, the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) 2015 Video Game Developer Satisfaction Survey was circulating, resulting in a host of comments on the blockbot from workers in the industry. In this paper we analyze these responses, which constitute some of the first empirical data on a public response to the use of autoblocking technology, to consider the broader implications of the algorithmic structuring of the online public sphere. First, we emphasize the important role that ggautoblocker, and similar autoblocking tools, play in creating space for marginalized voices online. Then, we turn to our findings, and argue that the overwhelmingly negative response to ggautoblocker reflects underlying anxieties about fragmenting control over the structure of the online public sphere and online public life. In our discussion, we reflect upon what the negative responses suggest about normative expectations of participation in the online public sphere, and how this contrasts with the realities of algorithmically structured online spaces.

Keywords
public sphere, counter publics, videogames, algorithms, social media

Introduction

In 2014, a maelstrom of infighting shook the videogame industry. Better known as gamergate, this conflict ostensibly emerged from concerns over ethics in games journalism. However, it quickly devolved into a transparently misogynistic campaign of abuse, specifically targeting outspoken female video game developers, critics, and journalists. Harvey & Shepherd (2016) argue that "if the #GamerGate controversy indicates anything about […] the contemporary context of technological spheres of production, it is that the increased visibility of women is not necessarily welcome" (p.4).

At the height of the controversy, Randi Harper, a computer engineer in San Francisco, designed the "Good Game autoblocker" (henceforth, ggautoblocker). This autoblocker was designed to auto-

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mate the process of blocking Twitter accounts connected to "some of the worst offenders in the recent wave of harassment" (IGDA, n.d.) The bot cross-referenced the followers of five of the most vocal pro-gamergate supporters. If a Twitter account was found to be following two or more of those accounts, they were then included on the blocklist. When a user subscribed to the blocklist, the bot automatically blocked those accounts. The International Game Developers Association posted a link to the blockbot in the Mental Wellness and Self Care section of their Online Harassment Resources webpage. The linked text read: "A third-party Twitter tool developed to quickly mass block some of the worst offenders in a recent wave of harassment and also accounts that follow those offenders" (Young, 2014).

In the end, the bot was a discursive sledgehammer, effectively shutting out between 8,000 and 10,000 accounts from subscribers' Twitter feeds. In essence, ggautoblocker, and blockbots more generally, are ways of curating comments and content on social media. The intention behind Harper's ggautoblocker was to free users' Twitter feeds from hurtful, sexist, and in some cases deeply disturbing comments. Despite the intention to insulate subscribers from harmful content without actually preventing others from posting, ggautoblocker was widely disparaged and became a source of criticism for many in the industry, as well as the games community more broadly.

Using qualitative responses from the International Game Developers Association's (IGDA) 2015 Developer Satisfaction Survey, this paper unpacks the reaction of video game developers to this autoblocker, as a means to explore the potential implications of autoblocking technology for the online public sphere. We argue that the story of ggautoblocker is rife with significant contradictions. First, we reflect upon the important role that ggautoblocker, and similar autoblocking tools, play in creating space for marginalized voices online. Then, we turn to our findings, wherein the overwhelmingly negative response to the blockbot reflects underlying anxieties about shifts in the structure of the online public sphere and online public life. In conclusion, we reflect upon what the negative response suggests about normative expectations of the public sphere in algorithmically structured online spaces.

Background

Social media platforms and the public discussions they facilitate are often framed as central to the contemporary public sphere. Their networked, non-hierarchical structure has been celebrated for enabling participation and interactivity at a scale that would have been unthinkable only decades ago (Castells, 2010; 2012; Shirky, 2008).

However, recent and troubling reports of online gender-based abuse, such as that which took place during gamergate, act as a stark reminder that not everyone is equally empowered to participate online (Jenson & De Castell, 2013). For example, in response to feminist cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian's advocacy for a more inclusive videogame culture, she received a series of threatening, misogynistic, and abusive tweets, her social media accounts were hacked and defamed, sockpuppet accounts were made in her name, and threats to her physical and personal safety forced her to cancel speaking events and temporarily leave her home (Valenti, 2015; Dewey, 2014). This is simply one example, but it illustrates the way that women's voices can be silenced and their full engagement discouraged via the same tools often lauded to facilitate participatory parity (Mantilla 2013, 2015; Jane, 2014). "Given the contestation of women's participation within digital games, [and online spaces], it is important to consider how [initiatives like ggautoblocker] are understood and negotiated" (Harvey & Shepherd, 2016, p.4).

These kinds of experiences reflect the perceived necessity of the blockbot at the time of its creation. Twitter's official response to the gender-based abuse during gamergate was underwhelming

and failed to curb abusive behavior and protect women online. Though Twitter *did* respond by creating a quick response tool, allegedly making it easier to report harmful or abusive tweets, these efforts had little impact on actually shielding users from online vitriol (Davis, 2014; Warzel, 2016). With few options for recourse embedded in the platforms themselves, mass-blocking tools act as 'do it yourself' solutions that allow users to exercise control over their social media experience and insulate women from the more abusive discourse that might otherwise chill their participation (Jane, 2016, 2017a, 2017b). We would be remiss to underplay the gravity of this protection, particularly in a field that heavily relies on digital spaces for both work and play. During the height of gamergate, ggautoblocker filtered out the agitators, shielding women game developers and critics from cyber-misogyny and allowing them to freely participate in the discourse in an already male-dominated field.

Beyond this, autoblocking tools are of theoretical importance because they introduce dynamism into the online public sphere in interesting and potentially contestable ways. Extant literature suggests that the public sphere is not unitary, but characterized instead by competing and unequal groups. According to Nancy Fraser (1990), "subaltern counterpublics" require "parallel discursive arenas" to define what's important to them, find their voice, and generally practice collective self-determination so that they can articulate and defend their interests to a wider public. We might, then, usefully characterize ggautoblocker as a socio-technical effort to restructure the discursive arena of Twitter to facilitate this counterpublic discourse (see Geiger, 2015, for a more detailed exploration of these issues). Crucially, ggautoblocker did so in a way that does not necessitate a retreat from online spaces. The bot was not without its limitations, however. As we seek to improve equity in online spaces, "it is essential to recognize the biases and assumptions that underpin any ideal and critically interrogate who benefits and who does not" (Caplan & boyd, 2016, p.15)[2]. As Caplan and boyd (2016) argue, "No intervention is without externalities" (p.15).

Method

Our data comes from the qualitative responses in the 2015 online Developer Satisfaction Survey (DSS) created by Dr. Johanna Weststar and Dr. Marie Josee Legault in association with the IGDA. This annual survey seeks, broadly, to understand the quality of life of video game developers working in the industry. The 2015 DSS garnered a total of 2,928 valid responses. Of that total, 75% identified as male, 22% identified as female, and 1.5% identified as transgender. As is the norm of the video game industry, respondents were young workers. More than half (51%) of the sample was between the ages of 25-34. The vast majority of respondents (76%) identified as white, caucasian, or European, distantly followed by East or South-East Asian, at only 9%. In this paper, we concentrate on a subset of respondents within the overall sample—those who made reference to the blockbot in some capacity.

Two iterations of coding took place to arrive at the smaller sample of qualitative comments that are the focus of this paper. First, we coded every qualitative comment in the diversity section of the survey using 30 primary codes and 24 secondary codes, for a total of 54 codes.[3] These codes were developed and tested by three researchers, achieving intercoder reliability.[4] Any differences between the codes applied to responses were discussed and reviewed until an agreement between all three researchers was reached. Over the course of this initial coding process we noticed that a central source of frustration for many respondents was external to their places of work; indeed, these frustrations were with the general state of discourse among members of the gaming community on social media, and within the gaming and mainstream press. This discovery led us to conduct a second round of coding using the primary code "public discourse," which included comments on gam-

ing and mainstream press, social media discussions, and the general public perception of the industry. From this re-coding it became clear that the "ggautoblocker" was a source of derision and hostility among respondents. We then searched all the qualitative responses for the terms "blocklist," "blacklist," "blockbot," "blocked," "autoblock," and "Randi Harper," and removed any responses that did not reference the ggautoblocker. Using only this new list of comments that contained mention of the ggautoblocker, we began a new coding process. This round of coding revealed three codes, which are the central themes analyzed in this paper.

Comments about the ggautoblocker were brought up 174 times by 103 respondents. Of those 174 responses, 10% (23) of comments came from women, 3% (5) from transgender men or women, 45% (79) from men, and 41% (72) did not disclose their gender. While this represents only a fraction of total responses, it is worth noting that the comments about ggautoblocker were completely unprompted. The survey itself did not ask about the ggautoblocker, or mass-blocking tools on social media.

Findings

While we recognize that, within the whole survey sample, responses that mentioned the Twitter blockbot were not incredibly prevalent, we were struck by the consistency of anger with which it was discussed. Not a single discussant reported using the tool, nor assessed it positively. As such, these comments reveal a perceived transgression among video game developers about the rules of online debate. This transgression was articulated in three primary ways; as a form of employment discrimination, as a form of slander, and as a form of censorship. In this section we provide a description of the three themes identified. An analysis of these themes follows in the discussion section.

Blacklisted from employment

First, 13% of respondents (22 comments) expressed fear that inclusion on the blocklist would have negative implications for their employment prospects. These respondents referred to ggautoblocker as an "industry blacklist." They suggested that their inclusion on it would limit their ability to contact employers or that it would tarnish their reputation and discourage potential employers from hiring them. For example, one respondent said, "The fact that I can be blacklisted by the industry for following a YouTuber that speaks out against unethical behaviour in the industry is insane." Another stated, "Most damaging of all was I tweeted a sarcastic tweet to some person and was placed on a blacklist which . . . essentially blocked me from engaging with prospective jobs opportunities."

Guilty by association

Our next code is titled "guilty by association". This second theme captures the responses that took issue with the label of "harasser" that membership on the blocklist implied. The list included over 8,000 accounts, many of whom followed outspoken and hostile Gamergate advocates but did not perpetrate harassment themselves. As such they took issue with being placed on the list for the act of following an account on Twitter, an action several respondents described as "guilt by association." Common comments included stories of being "libeled" or "slandered." Twenty-four percent of responses (42 comments) fell under this theme. For example, one respondent said, "blockbots generalised over 10k people as harassers with no proof what so ever." A second respondent stated they

had felt personally persecuted by the blockbot, explaining that it "blocked people based on followers not on actions." This respondent continues to explain that they, "as well as MANY other industry professionals were on that block list which was described by the IDGA as 'the worst harassers on the internet'. It's disgusting." Finally, another argued "The block bot was based on who the person follows on Twitter. It was promoted as a way to combat online harassment thus deeming anyone who happens to follow 2 people on Twitter harassers and that is simply not true."

Censorship

Thirdly, and most consistently, 44% of responses (77 comments) from our subset argued that the blockbot was a form of censorship. These respondents perceived the tool as hindering their freedom of expression, as a calculated effort to suppress ideological and political difference, and as limiting the potential for productive debate among the parties involved. Some reported self-censoring out of fear, and others framed the tool as "silencing disagreeing opinions" or "blockbotting dissent," as one respondent put it. It is worth noting that these claims, and the sense of persecution they draw upon, share a clear resemblance with the rhetorical tactics of what we have since come to understand as the "alt-right." For example, one respondent wrote:

> Again, white males such as myself are demonized in the games press daily. We are told that we are on "easy mode." Tell that to all the folks in my position who just want to make good games. And how does the IGDA react to this? By sponsoring an industry wide blocklist based on differences of political opinion and guilt by association.

Another said, "As an organisation [the IGDA] you should be encouraging open discussion on topics such as these, not encouraging and facilitating the wholesale blocking of contrary points of view leading to echo chambers and no possible hope of reconciliation."

Discussion

The blockbot and resulting outrage raise important questions about the public sphere, its deliberative function, and how social media infrastructure informs the relationship between the two. Our data offers a diagnostic moment to think through the implications of automating and outsourcing the job of curating information, and how this might limit or expand the "field of critique and analysis" (Caplan & boyd, 2016, p.11) at the heart of the online public sphere.

Without downplaying the very real benefit that the blockbot served for many, we further argue that the attitudes and perceptions of videogame developers toward ggautoblocker represent two underlying anxieties that reflect, more broadly, a lack of firm positionality in a still nascent online public sphere. The first anxiety rests in the merger of offline and online life, and the second rests in fragmenting control over information gatekeeping that undergirds the structure of the online public sphere.

Twitter blockbots: An industry blacklist?

Firstly, in the comments we categorized under "Blacklisted from employment," participants indicated that they felt there was a connection between being placed on ggautoblocker's list and diminishing prospects of new and future employment. While ggautoblocker was decidedly not the same thing as an industry blacklist, the prospect that it might function as one created a sense of unease

amongst participants in our sample. We believe that a strong anxiety underlying this fear of employment blacklisting lies in a recognition that any meaningful distinction between an online sphere and an offline sphere is quickly disappearing.

A fundamental construct of contemporary life is the elision of offline with online life, a construct that Mary Chayko (2017) refers to as techno-social life. Of course, the integration of these two previously distinct spheres is not apparent to some and is still actively resisted by others. This resistance is what media theorist Nathan Jurgenson (2011) refers to as digital dualism, a term Chayko (2017) defines as an "artificial and unnecessary separation of realms that are actually enmeshed" (p. 66). In an industry that heavily relies on digital spaces and thus online environments for both work and play, the videogame industry is sure to be one of the first sectors to viscerally feel the gap between online and offline life closing in. The reality is that one's behavior online undoubtedly follows them offline and this places pressure on both self-presentation and online reputation in a relatively new way. Thus, the disdain for ggautoblocker reflects anxiety over the still amorphous structure of not totally separate but not completely entwined spheres.

What's the guilt in association?

As a result of the broad reach of ggautoblocker, many accounts peripheral to the more coordinated attacks were included on the list, such as the IGDA's own Puerto Rico chairman, Roberto Rosario. When Rosario challenged his inclusion, Harper responded:

> If the Puerto Rico chairman of IGDF [sic] didn't want to be on the blocklist, he probably shouldn't have followed known harassers of women. (Harper, @freebsdgirl, 2014).

The conflict illustrates a compelling tension. Following someone on Twitter does not mean that you agree with his or her views. Following is, most simply, an admission of your desire to be aware of their speech. It is an offering of your attention, whether you agree with the speaker or not. However, it also contributes quantitatively to someone's "following," and we have yet to truly understand how much a large following lends legitimacy to a person's speech, to community members, to passersby's, and to newcomers. This raises an important question; in an environment where everyone has the capacity to speak, what legitimacy does our attention lend to abusive speech in social media spaces?

Censorship: Is refusing to listen tantamount to silencing?

These claims of censorship raise unique questions about the algorithmic structuring of the public sphere because they reflect a concern over the automating and outsourcing of gatekeeping practices among community members. While it is common for charges of censorship to be hurled at media companies and governments, the claims of censorship over a user-created and community shared blockbot represent an interesting departure from this. It invites us to grapple with questions of authority, power, and control over the fields of online debate. In models of communication where governments and media corporations are central in managing information flow, citizens themselves have typically acted as recipients. User-generated blockbots change the role that individual citizens can potentially play in shaping the field of public debate. This undermines traditional gatekeeping processes and confounds the dynamics of power concerning which stakeholders can and should shape the public sphere. Indeed, much of the anger present in claims of censorship seemed to stem from the belief that the IGDA and creator Randi Harper had no legitimate authority to curate online

information. It speaks, we think, to an acute anxiety about this fragmenting control, the potential to shape the field of discussion in one's own interest, and the potential power that implies.

In its operation, ggautoblocker was not radically distinct from other forms of online curation. Algorithms with important curatorial functions underscore social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. These algorithms work to match the content we see to our preferences and demonstrated browsing habits. There is no doubt that these processes have important implications for public deliberation; they surreptitiously insert digital borders in a way that erodes any reality of an "open" and "neutral" internet, despite the persistence of this myth (Caplan and boyd, 2016).

Due to the proprietary commercial function of social media algorithms, these operations are typically veiled from public view, "play[ing] out behind an opaque screen" (Caplan and boyd, 2016, p.9). Furthermore, because they are "designed to give users what they want" (Caplan and boyd, 2016, p.10), the preference-driven algorithms that guide individual social media experiences feel mechanistic, or, at the very least, benign in their politics. As Caplan and boyd (2016) argue, "the results [are] presented to us as the function of [technical] processes, instead of social and political ones" (p.9). This is assuming, of course, that they are noticed at all. These digital borders don't often invoke cries of censorship, because they are not perceived to suppress content, but instead elevate what is desired. That said, since the 2016 US election there has been a growing debate about the impact of social media algorithms in siloing different political perspectives. Interestingly, our example predates this debate by two years, and is unique in that it was a user-based initiative, and reflects socio-political priorities of users instead of the profit-driven priorities of platforms.

We argue that the anger present in our data is indicative of a moment when the videogame community was directly confronted with these processes and their implications. Dependent upon who deploys them and to what end, these processes can quickly and radically alter the field of debate. As our findings suggest, many participants felt the ggautoblocker indeed limited the "field of critique and analysis," as is illustrated by their cries of censorship (Caplan & boyd, 2016, p.11). This brings up important questions about whose responsibility it is to listen and engage in debate proper, and when is it appropriate to ignore or withdraw one's attention? As Van Winkle (2014) writes:

> It is not an inalienable right to be able to contact people you disagree with on Twitter in the name of making sure both sides of an argument are heard. Individuals have every right to have control over who they interact with.
>
> (para. 13)

Those angered by ggautoblocker expressed a variety of concerns, chief among them, however, was the belief that people should be granted access to the online public sphere without having to bend to others.

Conclusion and Future Work

In the end, the ggautoblocker represents a complex moment in digital culture, one with contradictory implications for participation in the public sphere. It was a moment of jarring recognition, brought on by the unapologetically political intention of this blockbot. It was not opaque in its operation. It was well known, and stated in the public description of the list, how it operated. The list itself was also public. In this way, the values behind ggautoblocker were laid bare from the outset. Unlike most algorithms, it did not present itself as a mechanistic process. It was experienced as social and political from the beginning, and was overwhelmingly resented for it. As we continue to reflect on the data and relevant literature, we believe future research should interrogate debates

around who controls the online public sphere, who should control it, and what constitutes proper participation within it.

Notes

1. Authors' names appear in alphabetical order. Both authors contributed equally to this article.
2. danah boyd publishes work using lower cases letter in her name.
3. Secondary codes acted as sub-themes to the 30 primary codes. For example, for the primary code "solution" (which indicated any time someone recommended a solution for diversifying the work force) we had a variety of secondary codes to help further explain the themes that emerged, such as "education and mentorship," "community outreach," and "change recruitment norms," to name a few.
4. We did not quantify the codes in such a way to assess a reliability percentage. Quantification took place only after the coding was completed, and only to the extent that we could say, for instance, 13% of the total comments were coded under "blacklisted from employment".

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