Moderation of Deliberation: How Volunteer Moderators Shape Political Discussion in Facebook Groups?

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Promise of openness

- Social media are associated with openness, increased participation and equal opportunities.

- Platforms want to maintain an illusion that everyone can participate without regulations.

- Regulation is done reluctantly and behind closed doors (Gillespie 2018).

- Moderation is required for protecting users, but it is also about reputation and brand management.

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Facebook moderation

- Originally, Facebook user-base was a homogeneous group of tech-savvy students who shared the same values and norms: those of the Facebook developers (Gillespie, 2018).

- Facebook did not expect moderation to become a significant problem and improving it was not in the interests of developers.

- Problems have emerged along with its global success: heterogenous user-base, cultural differences, local laws.

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Facebook moderation

- Multi-layer moderation system:
  - Software tools
  - Paid moderators
  - Volunteering users
- Volunteering users are still the most effective moderators.
- They understand group norms and language, are strongly committed to their communities, and derive personal meaning from moderation work (Gillespie 2018; Seering et al., 2019)
- Unaccountability and other problems usually associated with automated moderation tools.

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Political Facebook Groups

- Facebook hosts a great variety of user-created groups focusing on political and ideological topics, which constitute a notable public sphere for citizens' political debate.

- They promote societal change and counter-discourses to the dominant public voice (e.g. Sormanen & Dutton, 2015).

- Interviews for 15 moderators of active political Facebook groups in Finland:
    - Political actors and civil activists
    - Understanding user-driven moderation and its underlying logics.
    - How the moderation supports the deliberational quality of discussion?

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Findings

- Facebook's governance policy remains a *black box* to both group members and moderators.

- Platform's absence gives room for local group norms and identities to develop.

- Results to a great variety of local group norms and moderation policies – or the lack of them.

- Moderation is not only about the removal of content, moderators possess a great variety of strategies.

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Findings

- **Explicit strategies**: removing members, post-moderation, public interventions in discussions.

- **Implicit strategies**: applicant-screening, pre-moderation, hiding content without letting the participant know, face-saving behavior, private discussions with members and other moderators.

- Visible moderation may cause public disputes as members question the rules and moderation policy in public.

- Moderators want to protect group norms and avoid public conflicts but their activities remain invisible for the rest of the group.

- They limit members' opportunities for participation in problem solving and community development.

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Conclusion

- The key functions of Facebook, connecting users through social networks and information, have a huge democratic potential.

- Currently, global commercial platforms own the "public sphere" and we cannot control the rules of discussion.

- Volunteer moderation is not transparent and moderators prefer conformity over diversity.

- From the viewpoint of deliberation, group members should be aware of what is hidden from them and for what reason.

- Volunteer moderators are important gatekeepers: they can decide who has visibility in discussion and who is allowed to participate in it.