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In/visibility

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Visibility and *invisibility* are two states typically juxtaposed with one another. One is predicated on being able to be perceived or seen, while the other is defined by absence, unable to be identified or perceived. While these two states are frequently expressed as opposites, they can also exist in a more complex and seemingly paradoxical relationship, in which one begets the other. In other words, the invisibility of a thing can render another visible; likewise, the visibility of one thing can obfuscate the existence of another—and, along with it, its politics, contexts, antecedents, attendant influences, or impacts.

Particularly in online life, there is frequently a normative supposition that the information- and image-rich environment of the web and other platforms should, in the best circumstances, provide unfettered access to the circulation of all types of content, from the beautiful to abhorrent, from the pleasurable to prurient (and the pleasurable prurient, in many cases). Less attention is paid to what is *not* seen, to the *invisible*—be it actual content that is rescinded, altered or removed, or the opaque decision-making processes that maintain its flow.

The interplay of *in/visibility* online—determining what is available and unavailable for view—is central to the intertwined functions/mechanisms of user experience and platform control. Online *in/visibility* is further operationalized under globalized, technologically driven capitalism by a digital labour phenomenon that is both responsible for it and relies upon it: commercial content moderation, or CCM.

CCM is the screening of user-generated content, such as images and videos, for social media sites and platforms, by a globally dispersed workforce tasked with judging the “appropriateness” of content. Yet despite its essential function for digital media production in terms of brand management and legal compliance, CCM is a relatively unknown phenomenon, except to those who practice it, as CCM interventions remain largely invisible to sites’ users.

CCM workers are invisible by design. Whether working onsite at the global headquarters of a major internet firm, as call-centre contractors, or micro-task labourers, they are often immersed in disturbing, upsetting content day in and day out, viewing and then removing vitriolic hate-speech rants, racist imagery, or content depicting violence, animal abuse, sexual and physical assault, and death. Indeed, constant exposure to such material can lead to psychological trauma for CCM workers, the long-term results of which are not known.

The invisibility of CCM labour allows the public to imagine that social-media production is a painless, immaterial, and inhuman—rather than inhumane—process, and that any such curation practices that might occur happen only via algorithms and computational power, despite the fact that no computer can presently match human mediation. Further, CCM work is migrating across the globe to sites where labour is less expensive, more abundant, and invisible to Western customers for whom much of the content is destined. Thus, the material realities and outcomes of CCM have shifted to sites where fewer people (in their role as “users”) will perceive them, and where power relations (such as lax labour protections) minimize the potential interventions that could arise from such perceptions in the first place.

The rendering visible of CCM workers and their interventions is a critical first step toward ameliorating the negative aspects of CCM working conditions. This move from invisibility to visibility will further engender the development of a much more accurate picture of the affordances and costs of online life, as well as question the nature of online spaces as fundamentally democratic—and at what (and whose) ultimate expense.