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Indira Neill Hoch

Tumblr Repair Work

Broken World Confessions, Elections, and Meltdowns

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the actions and attitudes of Tumblr users as a form of *repair* (cf. Jackson 2014) integral to the continued inhabitation of the platform in the wake of multiple waves of population and de-population. Qualitative interviews conducted in 2021-2022 are paired with multimodal discourse analysis of selected Tumblr meta-fandom trends (Tumblr posts about Tumblr) referencing significant moments in recent Tumblr history. First, on November 5, 2020, users fervently discussed the United States Presidential Election and Castiel confessing his love for Dean Winchester on *Supernatural* (2005-2020). This moment has lived on, especially through the ‘breaking news’ meme format generated from still images from the episode. Second, in February 2024, Matt Mullenweg, CEO of Automattic and by extension Tumblr, publicly engaged with allegations of transphobic moderation occurring on the platform in a way that was characterized as ‘having a meltdown,’ leading to fan art production depicting various ‘scenes’ from the incident. Third, on April 1, 2024, Tumblr’s yearly April Fool’s feature allowed users to ‘boop’ one another by hitting a button on other users’ posts. The booping feature was generally well-regarded, and users both lamented the loss of the button and reminded others that the ‘like’ and ‘reblog’ features should be utilized more often going forward. The meta-fandom content under discussion, originating both before and after the interview period, echoes participants’ responses that continuing to create and share content on Tumblr some fifteen-plus years after its initial launch requires labor and repair, not innovation. The platform is in a state of disrepair and depends on user intervention to continue to function. However, this is repair work that users found worth the effort, as Tumblr continued to be their preferred social media experience when assessing alternatives.

KEYWORDS

internet cultures, repair, maintenance, platform, tumblr, social network sites

AUTHOR

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The Blue Hellsite (Affectionate)

This paper considers the actions and attitudes of Tumblr users, considered here to also be fans of Tumblr or metafans, within a conceptual framework of repair (cf. Jackson 2014) and how this repair is integral to the continued habitation of the platform in the wake of multiple waves of population and de-population. The 2018 porn-ban is perhaps the most widely studied of these waves (cf. Bronstein 2020; Davis 2024; Engelberg/Needham 2019; Pilipets/Paasonen 2022; Sybert 2022). But as will be seen through qualitative interview data and multimodal discourse analysis, the porn-ban has not been the only catalyst for changing actions and attitudes among those Tumblr fans still engaged on the platform post-2018. Considering meta fandom practice as repair offers productive avenues to understand fandom actions and attitudes in digital spaces and this paper offers insight into one possible application of Jackson's (2014) call to engage in 'broken world thinking' (cf. also Russell/Vinsel 2018 for thinking about maintainers rather than innovators in the history of technology). Indeed, interview participants did not frame their observations regarding Tumblr in terms of innovation, but rather focused on how Tumblr never had a 'working' version and was always necessitated fixes, both technological and social.

Tumblr users engaging in posting and sharing around these three events can be considered as part of the Tumblr meta fandom (cf. Tiidenberg/Hendry/Abidin 2021). That is, in addition to often engaging in fandom activities for specific media properties, they also can be thought of as engaging in a fandom about the Tumblr platform. Katrin Tiidenberg, Natalie Ann Hendry, and Crystal Abidin (2021) identify several strains of this meta fandom, including fandom of Tumblr folklore, fandom of Tumblr's features and functions, fandom of broken Tumblr, and fandom of Tumblr nostalgia among others. Throughout the present study's interview data, these strains of meta fandom became apparent in participants' responses. They were enthusiastic to discuss and dissect Tumblr with both affection and criticism, much as a fan would any other property in which they were invested.

Tumblr has a vivid history with participatory fandom. From its launch in 2007, it was adopted by fans as a place to create and share multimodal transformative works, owing at least partially to the ease of sharing media such as audio, animated gifs, and videos from a single interface. The decreased visibility of posts on Tumblr when compared to other platforms may have resulted in fans being less influential than those on Twitter or Facebook vis-à-vis established film and television producers, but also encouraging creativity among fans (cf. Klink/Pande/Hutton/Morimoto/McCracken 2020). Likewise, the openness of Tumblr's structures as compared to LiveJournal, an earlier platform also associated with fandom participation, may have contributed to increased conflict between fans, but also combated what Flourish Klink identifies as "cozy forms of discrimination" (Klink/Pande/Hutton/Morimoto/McCracken 2020) as Tumblr users are unable to effectively restrict the circulation of their

posts. McCracken (2017) identifies the technological features of Tumblr’s pseudonymity, curation opportunities, ability to block other users, obscuring of follower numbers, and ability to customize blogs as attractive to fans in the early years of the platform. She links this to established features of older platforms of MySpace and LiveJournal (as well as the idea of teenage girl culture and the curation of bedrooms) to elucidate Tumblr’s particular attractiveness to fans. As LiveJournal and MySpace lost fandom users, Tumblr provided a place to land. Also of note is that Tumblr allowed the posting of pornographic images, resulting in a vibrant community of NSFW selfie-sharers (cf. Tiidenberg 2016). By 2018, Tumblr had become heavily associated with fandom *and* NSFW cultures (and, of course, NSFW fandom cultures), if still somewhat opaque to outsiders. However, in November 2018, Tumblr would be removed from the Apple iTunes store suddenly when automatic filtering mechanisms failed and child pornography was discovered during an audit. The following month, Tumblr would institute a generalized ban on all pornography, though exceptions were made for artistic and educational content. The ban resulted in an exodus of content creators in addition to users for whom NSFW content, both fandom-related and not, was integral to their practice (cf. Bronstein 2020; Davis 2024; Engelberg/Needham 2019; Pilipets/Paasonen 2022; Sybert 2022). This specific period of Tumblr history has been understood as non-use and migration (cf. Edwards/Boellstorff 2020), but as will be demonstrated through the present interviews, Tumblr use has continued and some fans have persisted under practices of repair. In recent years, there has been discussion among ‘older’ Tumblr users of ‘younger’ fans coming to Tumblr from sites like TikTok and X and not necessarily understanding existing social norms. Perhaps most striking is the observed tendency of these new users to self-censor when compared to Tumblr users. Tumblr’s long-standing association with fandom cultures provides needed context for the repair work fans would undertake.

In this paper, qualitative interviews with participants conducted in 2021-2022 are paired with multimodal discourse analysis of Tumblr meta-fandom posts and trends (cf. Tiidenberg/Hendry/Abidin 2021) created in response to three noteworthy moments on Tumblr between 2020 and 2024. First, on November 5, 2020, users fervently discussed the United States Presidential Election and Castiel confessing his love for Dean Winchester on *Supernatural* (2005-2020). Second, in February 2024, Matt Mullenweg, CEO of Automattic and by extension Tumblr, publicly responded to criticism of alleged transphobic moderation in a way that would be characterized as ‘having a meltdown.’ Third, on April 1, 2024, Tumblr’s yearly April Fool’s feature allowed users to ‘boop’ one another by hitting a button on other users’ posts. The booping feature was generally well-regarded and users lamented the loss of the button. The Tumblr meta-fandom trends under discussion, originating both before and after the interview period, reinforce interview participants’ responses that continuing to create and share content on Tumblr some fifteen-plus years after its initial launch requires labor and repair, not innovation. To many, the Tumblr platform is considered in a state of disrepair and depends on user intervention to continue to function as a space for sharing fandom, social justice, and informational content. However, this is repair work that fans found worth the effort, as Tumblr continued to be their preferred social media experience when assessing alternatives.

Broken World Thinking and Fandom

Jackson (2014), in his analysis of science and technology studies, advocates for ‘broken world thinking’ in technology research, that “asks what happens when we take erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather



than novelty, growth and progress, as our starting points” (221). In order to remain stable, technologies must be repaired and maintained at multiple levels over the course of their existence (cf. Godfrey/Price/Lusch 2022; Russell/Vinsel 2018) and this is the narrative of technology that has at times been subsumed by chasing the ‘new’ or focusing on innovation. Ackermann (2020) delineates different activities that make up a broader category of “product care” with repair designating “activities that will make the product function properly again” (Ackermann 2020, 96). In Ackerman’s scheme, repair is conducted when something breaks, as opposed to preventative measures, mindful handling, or revival. Activities can fall into multiple categories simultaneously and are also subject to user intent (cf. Ackermann 2020, 96f.). When a user believes the product or technology to be broken, they may then engage in a process of repair. Godfrey, Price, and Lusch (2022) do caution that “the lines separating [repair, cleaning, and maintenance] blur upon a closer conceptual analysis” (230). Additionally, emotional attachment can increase the willingness to repair technologies and to take better care of those technologies over time (cf. Hernandez/Miranda/Goñi 2020).

Research into the human side of online social platform repair and maintenance work often focuses on direct moderation practices either undertaken by platform ownership entities (cf. Ruckenstein/Turunen 2020; Shestakofsky/Kelkar 2020) or volunteers (cf. Matias 2019; Seering/Kaufman/Chancellor 2022). User intervention outside the ownership structures may not be the most obvious path to far-reaching changes, but it has been shown to generate media attention and even alter structures as seemingly impenetrable as Google image search results (cf. Velkova/Kaun 2021). And while this repair work should also be undertaken by the entities and engineers responsible for the Tumblr infrastructure, factions outside Tumblr’s ownership structure have always participated in keeping the platform functioning, not only socially, but for many users also technically (cf. Cavalcante 2018; Glenhaber 2021; Hillman/Procyk/Neustaedter 2014; Willard 2020). It is not surprising then, that Tumblr users love discussing Tumblr’s demise or, perhaps more accurately, the process of its repair.

As Tiidenberg, Hendry, and Abidin (2021) note, Tumblr has metafiction practices specifically about Tumblr being broken. They argue, “Making fun of broken tumblr becomes an act of identification with the broken tumblr and links back to the common imaginary of tumblr as a space for weird people” (ibid., 125). Tumblr users also have a long history of utilizing the @staff tag in an effort to speak back to the platform’s employees when they feel that intervention is needed. While not always expecting a response, the social convention of @ing the staff username has imparted a particular sense of responsiveness among Tumblr users and the staff account, rather unlike other social media platforms. The centrality of the metafiction allows many Tumblr users to be conceptualized as fans when it comes to their active practice on the platform. Tumblr metafans express “a sense of undying loyalty to the platform despite all its disappointments” (ibid., 118) and devise humor from the platform’s broken infrastructure (cf. ibid., 124f.). The interweaving of critique and affection for a source text within fandom practice has long added to the complexity of understanding emotional responses and practice (cf. Click 2019, 4-6; Goodman 2015).

The care, emotional attachment, and visible evidence of repair strategies apparent in the Tumblr metafiction render the platform a fruitful site for the application of broken world thinking and repair practice. Broken world thinking, in turn, helps contextualize why fans of Tumblr continue to practice on the platform despite its brokenness and shortcomings.

Methods

This study draws from qualitative interviews with eleven Tumblr users still active on the platform in the Fall/Winter of 2021-2022 period and qualitative multimodal analysis of Tumblr posts and trends addressing the three Tumblr events under analysis: November 5, 2020, the Mullenweg Meltdown (February 2024), and April Fool's Booping (April 1, 2024).

Qualitative Interviews

Interview participants were recruited through a publicly shared post on the author's research Tumblr blog, then reblogged to their more-highly-followed personal blogs. As part of their dissertation research in 2017-2018, the author had previously recruited participants through this method in combination with snowball sampling (cf. Biernacki/Waldorf 1981). Some of the 2021-2022 participants were returning interviewees from the earlier project, and thus were originally introduced to the author through the snowball sampling method. Returning participants proved to be particularly insightful in their responses as they frequently compared their previous experiences with their current engagement with Tumblr. Snowball sampling has been found to be effective for finding respondents in niche and/or marginalized communities (cf. Atkinson/Flint 2001; Browne 2005) or those who do not wish to be found through other sampling techniques (cf. Naderifar/Goli/Ghaljaie 2017). Furthermore, trying to 'randomize' qualitative interview participants has not been found to produce richer results (cf. Noy 2008). Institutional IRB approval was received for all interview procedures. Interviews were conducted entirely in text on Discord.

In an effort to de-center white and Anglophone fandom narratives (cf. Gaston/Reid 2011; Pande 2018; Pande 2020), interview participants come from diverse ethnic and national positions. Six of the eleven interviews were with participants who identified with a race or ethnicity other than white non-Hispanic, and include participants from North and South America, Germany, and Turkey. However, all interviews were conducted in English. While Anglophone fandom practices were largely the content under discussion in the interviews, participants from non-English as a first language backgrounds did at times discuss the Anglophone nature of Tumblr itself.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Multimodal discourse analysis was utilized to analyze trends among high-circulation posts concerning the specific Tumblr events under investigation in this research. Multimodal discourse analysis as a method consciously focuses on visual arrangements, auditory information, the arrangement of space, and moving images as constructions of discourse (cf. Bateman 2008; Jewitt 2009; Levine/Scolon 2004). Rather than subjugating the visual and non-verbal as being subordinate to the verbal, as is often the case in a more traditional discourse analytic positioning, multimodal approaches link together multiple sensory experiences and explicate how they work together or against each other. Multimodal discourse analysis can be particularly insightful for analyzing texts such as Tumblr posts, which can combine audio, visual, and textual elements, as well as considerations such as sharing and adding additional commentary to existing posts through reblogging (cf. Bourlai 2018; Cho 2015; Tiidenberg/Hendry/Abidin 2021). In the present study, the author considers collections or trends among high-circulation posts about the three events under investigation as the multimodal object, rather than always singling out specific posts.



Tumblr Events and Repair Work

Remember, Remember, the Fifth of November (2020)

The evening of November 5, 2020 (by American reckoning), saw intense participation on Tumblr regarding several seemingly unconnected events. First was the ongoing news coverage of the returns from the United States Presidential election held two days earlier. By the evening of November 5, it had become apparent that Democrat Joseph Biden would win the election over incumbent Republican Donald Trump. Second, in the final season of the long-running series *Supernatural*, Castiel confessed his love to Dean Winchester before being banished to ‘superhell.’ By 2020, the intensity of *Supernatural* fandom on Tumblr (cf. Booth 2016; Hautsch 2018; Short 2016; Zubernis 2021) had cooled somewhat, but its prominent place in the Tumblr ecosystem was seemingly reactivated with this confession. A third event, which more readily faded as it turned out to be untrue, was the unsubstantiated rumor that Russian President Vladimir Putin would step down from office.

This intense participation on November 5, 2020, was noted as remarkable by interview participants the following year. Vera, a participant from Argentina, commented, “There was just. So much happening. [...] It was like being back in 2013 Tumblr for a glorious, glorious few days.” While most participants noticed that their Tumblr dashboards moved more slowly after the 2018 porn-ban than they had before, November 5, 2020, was markedly different and generated fandom nostalgia for an earlier, more active Tumblr age (cf. Tiidenberg/Hendry/Abidin 2021, 127).

The Castiel love confession scene in particular became almost instantly meme-able. Even five years later, a two-frame image meme showing Castiel and Dean from this scene continues to be used to announce worldwide breaking news events on Tumblr. Reproduced here in Fig. 1 is the base template for what might be called the ‘Destiel breaking news meme.’ This meme is still frequently used in 2025 to



Fig. 1: Blank template for the Destiel Breaking News Meme. The top panel with Castiel typically remains unchanged, while a description of the breaking news event is added to the bottom panel.

convey current event information. It traces its direct origin to November 5, 2020, as it consists of two stills from the episode aired that night.

In the meme, the top panel showing Castiel typically remains unchanged, with the original closed captioning reading, 'I love you.' The second panel shows Dean's response. In the actual episode, he says nothing. In the memetic versions, it is this second panel which is edited and the current news event the meme is announcing is added as text to the Dean panel.

In a metafiction iteration of this post from 2023, Dean's image is overlaid with text that speaks to the world having changed since the original confession, the fact that the characters (and indeed, those responsible for the production of *Supernatural*) had no way of knowing that this scene, and specifically these two stills, would take on the function of the 'town crier' for Tumblr users. The text concludes noting that in fact, Dean says nothing at all in the original version of this scene. He is silent in the original. Yet he is the one to convey the important information in the meme format. There are countless iterations of this meme that continue to be produced and circulated on Tumblr as significant news events happen. There are also dozens of metafiction versions of this meme that comment on how Tumblr users make use of this particular format to convey information. It is not uncommon on other styles of posts that share current event information for users in the reblogs to ask, "why am I not learning this from Dean?"

This meme has entered Tumblr's economy of inside jokes and what might be considered "Tumblr culture." Constance, a Mexican-American woman, noted that the idea of Tumblr culture could vary widely and "depends highly on who your circle of following is." This is in keeping with Tiidenberg, Hendry, and Abidin's (2021) understanding of Tumblr as silosocial (cf. 52-61). While these silos are not perfectly sealed from one another, they do require effort in order to understand the interests, connections, and cultures contained within. The Destiel breaking news meme, however, has the potential to cut across silos as it can be utilized for any number of current events.

Commenting further on Tumblr's metafiction practices and humor, Vera shared, "We have lore. And inside jokes. Who else is going to laugh about Ea-Nasir and his *fine* copper ingot? Or red and color theory? [...] We have a language that is so very specifically *ours*. So ingrained in our culture and history that we have genuinely developed inside jokes and lore and ways to keep them living." The Destiel meme works in much the same fashion, even being referenced in posts that do not contain the memetic images when breaking news happens. It also, in the moment of Castiel entering a kind of death, in a blatant and astounding case of 'bury your gays' (cf. Caterino 2025; Lay 2024), attests to how alive Tumblr still can be.

Vera shared that other platforms still frequently 'steal' content from Tumblr "while simultaneously pretending that we're DEAD." Henry, a Peruvian-Japanese man, noted this as well, stating "all the other social media sites think Tumblr is dead and they should keep thinking tumblr is dead." Mal, a white, non-binary user, also associated the perception of Tumblr with death, writing "i see a lot of the meme of the guy holding up a peace sign next to a grave and usually both the gravestone and the guy will be labeled 'tumblr' because of other sites' misconception that tumblr is a totally dead website and people on it joke that it should be." There was a strong sense among participants that 'outsiders' vastly overestimated how dead Tumblr actually was.

This is not to say that it was quite as 'alive' as it used to be, either. Henry went on to explain that in the post-2018 Tumblr landscape, commenting on other people's posts has become more central to his experience. Whereas before he would engage primarily in liking and reblogging, adding comments felt more important as fewer people seemed to use Tumblr. Here, the reduced population on the platform



effectively broke or degraded the overall functioning for the fans who persisted. More active engagement then becomes the act of repair. Encouraging artists, who will be discussed in more detail below, was seen as particularly important, but so too was supporting all users who still took the time to share posts.

Tumblr is both dead and not dead, in a state of breakdown yet still contributing to the spread of current event news items through memetic content. The proliferation of the Destiel breaking news meme attests to the continued life of Tumblr, as new content is being generated all the time. As a meme centered around the idea of ‘breaking news,’ iterations of the Destiel meme provide concrete evidence that Tumblr fans are still generating new content, in a way that is not always transparent in other shared posts, as timestamps are not prominently displayed on Tumblr. The production and visible inclusion of as-it-happens posts about current events acts as repair to reinforce that the platform is still much relevant and functional. The very nature of the meme is to present current events to the Tumblr audience in a way that is connected to aspects of Tumblr culture. Another long-standing joke in Tumblr fandom is that there is a *Supernatural* animated GIF for every occasion, even if the original post has nothing at all to do with the show (cf. Hautsch 2018). Now, the Destiel breaking news meme is available for any type of content imaginable and attests that Tumblr is still very much alive.

Exploding Cars and Hammers and Hammer Cars: The Mullenweg Meltdown

While hardly a new topic of discussion among Tumblr fans, the possibility of Tumblr Staff engaging in transphobic moderation processes gained additional traction when user Predstrogen was ‘banned for life’ in February 2024. Automattic CEO Matt Mullenweg then responded publicly to criticism on his personal Tumblr blog (photomatt) in an unprofessional manner that was largely categorized as ‘having a meltdown’ (cf. de Luna 2024; Silberling 2024). Tumblr had long been considered a space where gender and sexuality experimentation, community, and resources could flourish, though of course with complications, caveats, and nuances (cf. Brown 2020; Byron/Robards/Hanckel 2019; Dame 2016; Fink/Miller 2014; Jacobsen/Devor/Hodge 2022; Oakley 2016; Robards/Byron/Churchill/Hanckel/Vivienne 2020; Sharp/Shannon 2020). However, the 2018 porn-ban, when Tumblr moderation took a harder stance toward the sharing of ‘adult content’ on the platform, sharply negatively impacted the usefulness of Tumblr for trans content creators specifically (cf. Bronstein 2020; Haimson/Dame-Griff/Capello/Richter 2021). Haimson, Dame-Griff, Capello, and Richter (2021) are careful to note that, as a profit-driven entity, Tumblr was never going to be an ideal trans technology, but there are nonetheless lessons to be learned from Tumblr’s successes in serving some of its trans users between 2007 and 2018. However, the banning of erotics fundamentally undid Tumblr’s ability to function as a trans technology (cf. Haimson/Dame-Griff/Capello/Richter 2021). Thus, the Mullenweg Meltdown, which followed the banning of Predstrogen, should not be thought of as an isolated event for the Tumblr fans who took notice and responded, but rather another piece of evidence that the platform had been increasingly turning against its own trans userbase.

Predstrogen’s specific ban was ostensibly in response to posting “threats of violence against Tumblr staff” (Mullenweg, quoted in de Luna 2024). One Tumblr post singled out by Mullenweg and then widely published in popular press articles covering the incident reads, “i hope photomatt dies forever a painful death involving a car covered in hammers that explodes more than a few times and hammers go flying everywhere.” This was not seen as a reasonable or credible threat by many Tumblr fans, and some called it ‘cartoon violence.’ Meanwhile, Tumblr fans argued that more serious threats and hate-speech

blogs were still active on the platform (see de Luna 2024 for examples). Predstrogen's frustration with transmisogynistic harassment preceded the post, and her ban drew even more visibility to Tumblr's perceived discrimination in moderating and content control. Users were quick to draw examples from their own experiences where harassment, hate speech, and threats went unanswered by Tumblr staff. Mullenweg, despite saying he was on sabbatical, responded lengthily several times to visibly negative responses from the Tumblr userbase in a highly unprofessional manner, further encouraging fans to criticize his behavior and Tumblr's policies.

Interview participants noted Tumblr's shift toward detrimental moderation practices when commenting on changes they noticed on Tumblr post porn-ban. They generally identified artists and sex workers as those most negatively affected by the ban. Sociological and public health research has shown that the discrimination against trans women may disproportionately limit their economic opportunities and drive them toward sex work as a perceived viable option for survival (cf. Nadal/Davidoff/Fujii-Doe 2014), while research into the conditions that lead to trans men and other trans identities engaging in sex work has been minimal compared to research addressing the needs of trans women (cf. Jones 2020). Of course, trans art and image making also found a home on Tumblr (cf. Fink/Miller 2014; Sharp/Shannon 2020) and one should not underestimate how many trans artists were also affected negatively by the ban.

Regarding issues with content moderation, several interview participants believed uneven enforcement and consequences as being a long-standing issue on Tumblr, rather than porn-ban specific. In fact, there had been an earlier attempt at moderating pornography, and other 'sensitive' content (including mental health and queer identities) in 2013, though this affected only tag searching, not the overall posting and sharing of content (cf. Lamerichs 2020). Constance summarized that while her experiences were largely positive there was "a much darker side of tumblr that does thrive from the lack of supervision and moderation. That actively recruits people to hateful and bigoted thoughts." She was then adamant that this was not related to the porn-ban and that the porn-ban did nothing to curtail such content.

Among the shared posts on Tumblr in response to the Mullenweg Meltdown are multiple artistic depictions of Predstrogen's 'threat' of an exploding hammer car. Several of these pieces of art continue to circulate. A number of them share thematic similarities worth noting and contextualizing within the frame of broken world thinking and how these images may function as acts of repair, while also aligned with resistance. The artwork tends toward the cartoonish or exaggerated, realism is not attempted. The colors are bright and eye-catching, sometimes invoking the color scheme of the trans pride flag, but also bright yellows and reds associated with fire. There are no human figures present in the artwork. Instead, the composition generally includes a car, a hammer larger than the car, and the suggestion of impact or explosion. This imagery does not one-to-one match with Predstrogen's original post, which suggests the hammers (plural) are attached to the car and subsequently fly everywhere. Several of these images, reminiscent of one another, have collected thousands of notes each and have been reproduced in popular press articles covering Predstrogen's ban and Mullenweg's response.

Artists were noted several times by interview participants to be among the populations who were most negatively impacted by the porn-ban and changes in Tumblr policies and cultures over time. Participant Green, a Turkish non-binary user, noted that not only the artists left Tumblr, but "Some people who followed these artists ended up following them to these [other social] platforms, which made the community interactions slower." Participant Jenna, a biracial Japanese-White participant, noted that it



was, in fact, work to continue supporting artists on Tumblr. And that work was important. When discussing themes they noticed through metafiction posts, Jenna said the posts they encountered the most were “discussions about the importance of interacting with content, usually advocating for reblogging, not just liking, and commenting on fic and art.” The platform would only continue to be useful if the people on it did repair work with the reduced population. Anna also emphasized repair as necessary for continued use of the platform. She described Tumblr as “in need of some help” and “while good in some ways, is very much what you make it to be.” Both curation and encouraging other Tumblr users to share their content through reblogging and commenting was deemed necessary to support the community that still existed on the platform. While some aspects of this attitude align with the idea that Tumblr requires maintenance, it is perhaps more accurate to think about these acts of care as repair, as participants could not identify a moment in time where the platform might have ‘worked correctly.’ Personal curation and being a part of supportive networks has always been necessary to make use of Tumblr.

The Mullenweg posts and surrounding discussion necessitated a great deal of work from a good number of people. Tumblr fans went on to document and share cases of other trans women having their blogs banned or deleted, reported anti-trans content being posted and shared, and took the time to create detailed timelines of Tumblr’s transphobic moderation and terms of service changes over the years. The creation of and participation in the sharing of art was just one piece of this repair work. Rather than leave the platform entirely, trans users have continued to use Tumblr post porn-ban and post-Mullenweg Meltdown. This reinforces the idea that emotional attachment is central to whether or not repair work actually gets carried out (cf. Hernandez/Miranda/Goñi 2020; McLaren/Niskanen/Anshelm 2020). It is often easier in contemporary capitalist society to simply ‘throw away’ a technology. In the present case, this might mean moving to another social platform. And while some, of course, left, others persisted.

Andrew, a non-binary white user who first came to Tumblr because of the artists, emphasized that the smaller user base in 2021 was part of the appeal of Tumblr sharing, “I do share the feeling that it might be worse if a ton of people started using Tumblr again en masse, particularly new users who aren’t used to the platform,” and that while it took effort, particularly in terms of curation, “you can find great niche interest groups and have a good time.” While this interview took place prior to the Mullenweg Meltdown, there are trans users still actively posting content regarding their transitions to Tumblr. “Hammer Car” and variations of the hammer car theme are sometimes referenced or included as tags in this transition content, rendering it part of Tumblr’s system of metafiction. Rather than stop posting content altogether, these trans users insist on staying while also reminding those who encounter their transition photos that harm has been done. Repair is achieved both through the sharing of new content as well as refusing to let knowledge of Mullenweg’s Meltdown fade. As in the *Supernatural* meme above, mending together continuity in Tumblr practice is a vital aspect of repair.

On February 24, 2024, a Tumblr staff post titled “A message from a few of the trans staff at Tumblr & Automattic” was shared. In this post, the staff members wrote, “We believe that Matt’s response to this ask and his continued commentary has been unwarranted and harmful,” and explicitly said that the hammer car post “does not meet our definition of a realistic threat of violence” (Tumblr Staff 2024). They did however write that there was other content that warranted Predstrogen’s suspension. Reactions to this staff post were of course varied, but clearly constitute an additional act of repair work, this time initiated from the side of Tumblr staff. Importantly, for Tumblr and its trans users, there is likely no end point for repair. There is no idealized assumption that Tumblr will become a platform that is open

and safe for trans users. As an ostensibly profit-driven enterprise, even at its best, Tumblr would always fall short (cf. Haimson/Dame-Griff/Capello/Richter 2021). And yet, enough repair has taken place that some fans persist.

Boop for the People

Tumblr's annual April Fool's feature on April 1, 2024, allowed fans to 'boop' one another. Users performed a boop by clicking a button next to another user's name on the Tumblr dashboard. This would cause an animation of a cat's paw to appear on screen, completing the booping. A counter also became part of the dashboard for the day, counting both how many times the Tumblr user had been booped and had booped others. In meta-fandom posts circulating on that day, users largely expressed positive feelings toward booping and positive feelings when being booped. Others pointed out that the 'like' and 'reblog' buttons were Tumblr features available year-round and could invoke the same sort of positive affect (cf. Bourlai/Herring 2014; Cho 2015). What fans were experiencing was the joy of interaction on the platform, something that many users had perceived as decreasing in the many years some of them had been using Tumblr. Positive feelings on and toward Tumblr could still be marveled, even in the immediate wake of the Mullenberg Meltdown. Booping and the affect that surrounded it acted as yet another act of repair, both among fans and between fans and staff/developers, who demonstrated that they could introduce a feature that fans enjoyed. It might not have been even a fraction of what the fans wanted or needed to truly repair the platform, but it was something.

And Tumblr providing something often proved enough for interview participants, as it was more than they were accustomed to from competing social platforms. Cal, a Black user who does not have a gender, simply described their attitude to Tumblr as "we're happy to be on tumblr because its not other websites." Anna argued that despite its faults, there is "a mindset of I'm not leaving this platform until it actually shuts down" on Tumblr and that she subscribes to this point of view, even though she sees many problems with it. Vera summarized that while she thought of Tumblr as "the blue hellsite" back in our original 2017 conversations, after the initial upheaval following the porn ban, things eventually "mellowed out. It's weird to think of now, but if you look at the current social media landscape, Tumblr is the best and chilliest by far." Tumblr continues to persist as a platform that people choose to use over available alternatives. And this choice itself resonates with emotion. Cara, a German woman, noted that "With its userbase shrinking, it seems that people have become protective of tumblr." Intensely visual (cf. Chang/Tang/Inagaki/Liu 2014; Gürsimsek 2016), affective (cf. Byron/Robards/Hanckel/Vivienne/Churchill 2019; Cho 2015), and persistently chaotic in terms of search and retrieval (cf. Ogden 2022; Stein 2025), Tumblr offers users possibilities for engagement and interaction unlike other social platforms. And the boop button is yet another instance of how fandom around the Tumblr platform remains powerful. Like November 5, 2020, fans seemed exuberant on that day. The boop button, and subsequent endorsements of commenting and reblogging after the boop went away acted as repair work to continue to bind Tumblr users together in positive affect.

Tumblr, simultaneously being broken, dead, and in need of repair, acted as motivation to engage in repair work and continue to direct staff's attention towards those aspects that needed to be repaired, however incompletely. A post with over 100,000 notes shared after April 1, 2024, by a now-deactivated user offers a few suggestions to Tumblr staff: don't get rid of the boop button and leave trans women on the platform alone. This massively popular post both implicitly endorses Tumblr as being a place worth



preserving and improving, the boop button was a good addition, while acknowledging the ongoing and fractured nature of the work being done to repair the platform. Multiple interview participants commented Tumblr has never had a successful iteration. There has never been a ‘good’ version of Tumblr. And yet, posts like these, made on Tumblr and directed at Tumblr’s fans and ownership, suggest that it is not yet time to throw Tumblr away.

If nothing else, the boop button did return later in 2024 for Halloween.

Break out the Tombstone

There is, of course, an alternative way to recount experiences of the last five years of Tumblr history. In this alternative narrative, innovation can be emphasized over repair. Multiple features were introduced on the platform during this time frame, including Post+ (cf. Perez 2023), Communities (cf. Sato 2024), and most recently Tumblr TV (cf. Davis 2025). These features were generally long in development and fans had some experience with versions of them prior to formal launch. However, telling a narrative of Tumblr through innovation is ill-fitting with fans’ experiences actually interacting with and inhabiting the platform over years. Focusing on repair more accurately encompasses how they view and work with Tumblr.

Vera, specifically commenting on Post+, a feature which allowed Tumblr bloggers to introduce subscription fees for exclusive content, observed, “The userbase is so *staunchly* against being used for corporate gain and greed that staff has often rolled back planned features that nobody asked for or wanted.” Henry also singled out Post+, writing about “how normal it is that the Tumblr userbase has an antagonistic relationship with staff, how each other post made by them is met with vitriol, one of the heights of that being the post plus debacle from a few weeks ago.” Post+ would eventually be fully eliminated. Both communities and Tumblr TV in their finished forms are too new to draw concrete conclusions regarding success or failure, but given the history of major Tumblr features, there is a good chance that they will be underutilized or generally ignored by the fans.

Tumblr fans’ practices rely on continual repair work to mend together experiences that approximate the platform they wish to inhabit. They undertake behaviors and practices that allow a sense of comfort with the space where they feel they take an active part in shaping. Always these acts of repair are limited by the malleability of Tumblr itself, and the external tools and browser extensions that might be provided to help them overcome aspects of the platform they do not like. The three moments in time captured and analyzed in this research offer insight into the ongoing processes fans of Tumblr engage with in order to negotiate their continued use and participate in repair. This includes the sharing of current events through *Supernatural* memes that simultaneously perpetuate elements of Tumblr culture. In regard to the Mullenweg Meltdown, fans both centralized histories of anti-trans moderation practices and continued to share trans content in ways that acknowledged the harm being done to users but refused to give up space. And finally, in the April Fool’s booping, fans consistently reminded each other that continued active engagement with each other’s content through liking and reblogging was necessary repair work to maintain a sense of engagement and joy. All of these acts of repair combine social and technological aspects of the platform in order to exercise care and continued use.

None of this repair would have necessarily been possible or sustained without Tumblr fans’ existing affection for the platform, especially in a social media environment that provides them with mul-

tiple alternatives. Repair work on Tumblr is seldom either purely technological or social, but rather necessitates an understanding of both sets of forces. Repair work through reblogging, rather than just liking, for example, requires functionality of the reblog feature from the technological side, but also the social understanding that spreading a ‘good post’ is far more community-building than just adding a ‘heart.’ Overwhelmingly, interview participants believed their continued support of other users and their content was the most actionable way to repair Tumblr. To keep Tumblr operational, new content had to be generated, rewarded, and shared. The three events under investigation here are particularly productive times of repair, as existing technological opportunities come into contact with socially meaningful challenges. This is not to deny that other platforms may generate deep affection as well. An understanding of how repair might function on other platforms requires an equally nuanced investigation of social and technological limitations and possibilities (see Simpson/Hamann/Semaan 2022 for an insightful discussion of ‘domestication’ among LGBTQ+ users on TikTok that engages in this work).

These events become part of the metafiction to be transformed and referenced persistently over time as part of Tumblr’s narrative of repair and fandoms of features and functions, brokenness, and nostalgia (cf. Tiidenberg/Hendry/Abidin 2021, 122-127). Acknowledging the shortcomings of the platform, both historically and contemporaneously serve as one way of binding Tumblr fans together, even as silosociality might create divisions.

It is, of course, of note that the ‘darker’ parts of Tumblr referenced by several participants also exist. Far-right extremism continues to be hosted on Tumblr, though those posts seem to seldom bleed into other spaces. More frequent and permeable are instances of racism, misogyny, and transphobia which plague fandom more generally and are not necessarily Tumblr specific (cf. Aburime 2022; Nisbett 2018; Pande 2024; Rouse/Condis/Stanfill 2024; Stanfill 2024).

This research extends understanding of how platforms are utilized and transformed through fandom participation, particularly when users might be categorized as fans of the platform itself. The sense of loyalty that users feel to Tumblr, both in spite and perhaps because of the brokenness they are quite critical of, is consistent with practices of repair. For repair to take place, fans must both have access to the technological materials that make repair possible and have an emotional (or economic) attachment to the technology (cf. Hernandez/Miranda/Goñi 2020). Tumblr fans’ emotional attachment to the platform both necessitates and makes possible the chronology of repair which they undertake in the wake of ever-shifting online environments, competition from other platforms, and ongoing ruptures within the space they begrudgingly might call an online home (but more, often Hell-site).

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