**Purging the queer archive: Tumblr’s counterhegemonic pornographies**

Jacob Engelberg, King’s College London. Jacob.Engelberg@kcl.ac.uk

Gary Needham, University of Liverpool. Gary.Needham@liverpool.ac.uk

**Abstract**

On December 17, 2018, microblogging site Tumblr began a purge of porn using algorithms to determine content deemed pornographic. Given the platform’s pre-eminence as an online community space in which queer users could collate, curate, and share porn content, it is useful to understand these microblogging practices as the labour of archiving queer desires. We investigate what counterhegemonic potentials Tumblr offered its queer users, and that which is now lost, through the flexibility of its interface and the extensive number of microblogs dedicated to heterodox pornographic phenomena. With the indiscriminate crackdown on porn content—and the subsequent eradication of queer pornographic spaces—we reflect on the precarity of the queer porn archive in the digital age.

Keywords: Tumblr; queer archives; algorithms; bisexuality; queer porn.

Look, we've taken a pretty hard line on freedom of speech, supporting our users’ creation, whatever that looks like, and it's just not something that we want to police.

 David Karp, Tumblr CEO (2013)

the failure of the speech act to do what it says is not a failure of intent or even circumstance, but it is actually what the speech act is doing…the nonperformative does not "fail to act" because of conditions that are external to the speech act: rather, it "works" *because* it fails to bring about what it names.

Sara Ahmed (2006, 105; original emphasis)

For queers, a broken promise comes as no surprise. The promises of happiness, liberation, equity under law, and adequate support from the state have all repeatedly fallen short on their word. For those of us attuned to the dissimulative workings of queerphobia in our homonormative-homonationalist age, suspicion toward the statements of institutions is imperative for survival. In this time, when networks of queer community and interpersonal relation are so often digital, the self-effacing hegemony of tech companies, like Tumblr, demand our queer suspicion more than ever.

It is within this digital landscape that the closet comes to be refashioned, its emergent epistemology coded in data and algorithms that are themselves dissimulative. Yet we are no longer in the closet alone, we don’t chose to be there, it is our virtual selves, the likes and the virtual connections, that are denied to us and work to undo the archivalmapping of ‘queer history in the making’ (Halberstam, 2005, 170). Our relation to the digital, the extensibility of our identities and desires are undone in a moment – December 17,2018 as it happens. Here we are reminded of how precarious the immaterial is for queers when we consider the myriad ways in which our social, cultural, and political lives, and through porn our desirous lives, are archived as pleasures and experiences, made meaningful through the interface of self, screen, and sociability. The library is now closed! As Jack Halberstam notes, the queer archive ‘is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity’ (2005, 169-170). Tumblr’s move to eradicate all porn content through an algorithmic clean-up has hit queer users with moral castigation. Tumblr, we argue, existed as an unofficial digital archive of queer pornographic heterogeneity, curatorial practice, and counterhegemonic pleasures and bodies. The wilful eradication of what Tumblr’s algorithm deems porn content (cover yourselves up ‘female-presenting nipples’! The algorithm, like Justice Potter Stewart, knows it when it sees it!) has put queer sexuality and expression under digital chastity and thrown away the key.

 One of the qualities specific to porn on Tumblr was how a user’s interface allowed for counterhegemonic taxonomies that unfurled in curated, composite feeds. PornHub and many other tubesites operate strict divisions between ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ porn, consequently rendering a user’s access contingent upon a binaristic choice. An obvious limitation evident here is the prerequisite to make a *monosexual* choice, a demand that precludes the possibility of a non-monosexual, bisexual, or queer approach to porn consumption. The sub-categorisation of transgender bodies and bisexual MMF sex within this dichotomy has subsequently been a source of contention, revealing the cissexist and monosexist limitations of these tubesites’ gay/straight imperatives. For users interested in viewing porn’s multiplicities of genders, assemblages, and acts within *one* platform, the monosexual choice is an encumbering regulatory apparatus that marshals desire into two distinct, and highly assumptive, categories.

Maria Pramaggiore articulates the capacity of a bisexual epistemological position to ‘reframe regimes and regions of desire by deframing and/or reframing in porous, nonexclusive ways’ (1996, 3). This bisexual approach of erotic deconstruction or reorganisation was made structurally possible by Tumblr’s digital architecture, which allowed a spectrum of gendered objects and sex acts to be queerly presented within one abundant feed. Lauren Berlant reminds us that the social order ‘teaches you to renounce your desire’s excess so that you can be intelligible under the discipline of the norms that make hierarchies of social value seem natural’ (2012, 52). Most tubesites codify this renunciation through the regulatory monosexual imperative and their specialised subcategories (BBW, twink, MILF, daddy, et cetera). The curated Tumblr queer porn feed offered an alternate modality where the excess of one’s desires need neither be tapered nor ordered within hegemonic taxonomies.

It is well established that Tumblr has been home to queer (and feminist) pornographies that dissent from the standards of mainstream porn (Mondin, 2017). We would like to suggest two counterhegemonic examples of Tumblr’s queer porn reframings: ‘small’/‘average’ penis appreciation microblogs and *Fuck Yeah! Friendly Fire* (*FY!FF*). Given the preponderance of ‘large’ penises across many pornographic loci, microblogs including *heartsmall*, *ilikedicklets*, and *normalsizepenispride* reframed the ‘small’/‘average’– and often flaccid – penis as desirable. bell hooks describes her personal process of ‘letting go my erotic fetishization of the hard penetrating dick, to embrace an eroticization of the penis that was more wholistic…I enjoyed learning how to be sexually aroused by the sight of a non-erect penis’ (1999). hooks’s articulation of reframing her desire toward the penis in a way that resists patriarchal, phallocentric, hard-bodied myths is particularly apposite to our consideration of these microblogs. Through her account of *learning* to be sexually aroused otherwise, hooks addresses, first, the ways in which our desires are constituted by what we consume and, second, the mutability of desire itself. In reframing the ‘small’/‘average’ penis within the locus of desire (rather than comedy or medicine, for example) these Tumblr microblogs recalibrated the symbolic economy of desirable bodies.

The phenomenon ‘friendly fire’ refers to moments in straight porn in which a man cums on another man, often by accident. *FY!FF* was a preeminent platform for editing and collating these instances. By isolating these awry ejaculations – the ‘collateral damage’ straight men ‘risk’ when engaging in group sex with other men – viewers could find unintended queer pleasures. *FY!FF* thus engaged in a curatorial-editorial practice that performed a hermeneutic shift, one that gave straight porn queer meaning. *FY!FF* was removed by Tumblr without explanation on 9 April, 2018 after six and a half years of operation (Lyon, 2018). The pre-‘porn ban’ deletion of *FY!FF* forewarned the crackdown that would follow, itself collateral damage in the formulation of the so-called ‘better, more positive Tumblr’ (D’Onofrio, 2018).

The labour involved in organising and curating Tumblr’s queer porn microblogs, which often took place over several years and with daily updates, must also be understoodas a type of queer archival practice. This worked in tandem with the counterhegemonic sentiments of the sites we mention above, what Abigail De Kosnik refers to in a feminist context as a ‘rogue archive’. She goes on to say:

One of the greatest political potentials of rogue digital archives is that groups that have occupied the margins of “mainstream” society, and have consequently been largely marginalized by traditional memory institutions, can build their own robust cultural memory sites. (2016, 135).

The queering of digital media, implicated in the ‘archival turn’, gesture towards the unofficial, the clandestine, and the rogue, questioning what constitutes an archive and what the function of an archive is when its creators are not, professionally speaking, trained archivists. Equally, bloggers may not think of themselves as creating archives out of their porn practices of threading together images, videos, and gifs which operate as a feed and are chronologically stored via Tumblr’s archive widget. Archives are contingent upon politics and power, the lesson we have taken forward from Michel Foucault (1969/2002) into the digital age and with which official gay and lesbian archives are routinely implicated *vis-à-vis* porn. Yet, archiving as practised through Tumblr is queered though mutable, multiple, illegitimate, and non-traditional methods of selection and curation.

Yoking together content and curatorial practices in queer ways, queer archives’ roguishness renders them spaces for experimentation in the sense that Ann Cvetkovich details in *An Archive of Feelings* (2003, 8). Tumblr’s queer porn networks were important loci of experimental archiving that resisted the normalising and regulatory practices of official archives and mainstream porn. Tumblr afforded new ways of articulating and refining queer porn in the truest sense of reifying ‘outlaw sensibilities, self-made kinships, chosen lineages, utopic futurity, exilic commitment, and rage at institutions that police the borders of the normal’ (Getsy, 2015, 12). From those microblogs we have already mentioned, to singular porn feeds like *proteinmouth* (a curated feed ofmen gorging on other men’s cum), queer porn blogs foregrounded desires, bodies, feelings, and passions defined and shaped by its communities of queer bloggers, users, masturbators, and rogues.

The difficult lesson we have learned from Tumblr’s porn purge is that algorithms can be utilised for sex-negative, censorious, and queerphobic protocols. Our precarious digital queer porn exists as data to be purged and swiftly dealt with – a queer *Fahrenheit 451* if you will. Confirming Jacques Derrida’s perspicuity, the archive being a process of simultaneous preservation *and* destruction (1995/1998), the digital exacerbates and expedites the destruction of our queer porn counter-publics. Equally, Tim Dean has stressed that digital porn is somewhat paradoxical anyway:

… each image encodes precise metadata that enables both unlimited reproduction of the image and forensic tracking of its provenance. However, the production of such images serves a broader tracking function by intensifying surveillance of our bodies and sexualities. (2014, 9)

Tumblr’s halcyon days of facilitating queer porn as an empowering and validating digital repository of feelings, pleasures, and visibilities has been abruptly expunged. Karp’s assurance that he would support his ‘users’ creation, whatever it looks like,’ (2013) enabled Tumblr, as illuminated through Sara Ahmed’s analytic of nonperformativity (2006), to do just the opposite. A lesson for us all that inmaking public a digital archive of our pornographies and desires that we are subject to an ephemeral, unsafe, and precarious situation that makes our archive not just rogue but also at risk of being abjured and eliminated. The removal of porn from Tumblr with little advanced warning is a tremendous loss for queers already compromised by the global right-wing renaissance. The queer content, the attack on the queer labour of archival porn curation, the wholesale aversion to our sexual publicness, the destruction of virtual communities, the sex workers, artists, and nascent queer teens finding their way in a digital world that otherwise does not address them. December 17, 2018 was testament to the fears that queer visibility can still be intolerable and unintelligible when we choose to vaunt that which makes queers horny.

**References**

Ahmed, Sara. 2006. “The Nonperformativity of Antiracism.” *Meridians* 7 (1): 104-126. doi:10.1353/mer.2007.0000.

Berlant, Lauren. 2012. *Desire/Love*. New York, NY: Punctum Books.

Cvetkovich, Ann. 2003. *An Archive of Feelings*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Dean, Tim. 2014. “Pornography, Technology, Archive”. In *Porn Archives*, edited by Tim Dean, Steven Ruszczycky, and David Squires, pp. 1-28. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

De Kosnik, Abigail. 2016. *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1995/1996. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

D'Onofrio, Jeff. 2018. “A Better, More Positive Tumblr.” *Tumblr Staff*, December 3. https://staff.tumblr.com/post/180758987165/a-better-more-positive-tumblr.

Foucault, Michel. 1969/2002. *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York and London: Routledge.

*Fuck Yeah! Friendly Fire*. fyfriendlyfire.tumblr.com.

Getsy, David [editor]. 2016. *Queer*. London: Whitechapel Gallery.

Halberstam, J. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives.* New York NY: New York University Press.

*heartsmall*. https://heartsmall.tumblr.com.

hooks, bell. 1999. “Penis Passion.” *Lion’s Roar*, July 1. https://www.lionsroar.com/penis-passion/.

*ilikedicklets*. https://ilikedicklets.tumblr.com.

Karp, David. 2013. “1,215.” The Colbert Report. Comedy Central. New York, NY. July 15, 2013.

Lyon, Trey. 2018. “Tumblr Thought They Could Kill a Movement.” *FY!FF*, October 9. https://fyfriendlyfire.com/tumblr-thought-they-could-kill-a-movement/.

Mondin, Alessandra. 2017. “‘Tumblr Mostly, Great Empowering Images:’ Blogging, Reblogging and Scrolling Feminist, Queer and BDSM Desires.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 26 (3): 282-292. doi:10.1080/09589236.2017.1287684.

*normalsizepenispride*. https://normalsizepenispride.tumblr.com.

Pramaggiore, Maira. 1996. “BI-ntroduction I.” In *RePresenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire*, edited by Donald E. Hall and Maria Pramaggiore, 1-7. New York, NY and London: New York University Press.

*proteinmouth*. https://proteinmouth.tumblr.com.