Tarleton Gillespie*,* **Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media**, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018, 304 pp., $30.00 (hardcover).

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The idea of the uncontrolled, free-flowing, interconnected, utopian Internet narrative was once alive and well. Thinking about Y2K, the fear it sparked, watching YouTube videos without ads when the platform first launched, having to register for a Facebook account using a university email address, and the launch of an Instagram that featured only basic photo filters, all illustrate how Web 2.0 has greatly evolved. Social media, as it is such a prevalent phenomenon, has greatly shifted the contours of the Internet. Instead of consistently empowering users, at times, social media actually does the opposite. The 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Cambridge Analytica scandal are real-life examples that reveal ongoing issues with the Internet and with social media. Events like these call into question the amount of control that social media platforms should have on circulated content and represent a major concern for designers, developers, social media users, policymakers, and academics alike. A main point of consideration is understanding which kinds of content can be published versus which kinds of content never get published and why.

Tarleton Gillespie, who serves as principal researcher at Microsoft Research New England and adjunct associate professor at Cornell University, seeks to understand this phenomenon. His current work looks critically at how algorithmic systems and social media platforms construct public discourse. Published by Yale University Press, his foundational book, **Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media***,* takes a deep dive into the relationship between society, the power of platforms, social media platforms censoring of users' posts, and social media content moderation. A major point in the book examines the freedom of expression, or lack thereof, due to social media companies setting content guidelines deeming which content counts as appropriate. He also analyzes the impact private governance has on public discourse and social media users. From this, he discusses the concepts of being censored online and how news feeds are easily manipulated, leading to a shift in democratic and social norms. This pivotal text further develops the literature on algorithmic systems, content moderation, and gatekeeping. For example, Susan Roberts' (2019) ethnographic study of the commercial content moderation industry and Nicolas P. Suzor's (2019) research on how our digital environments are governed and censored by tech companies build upon Gillespie's work. The goals of his text are met in three main ways: (1) through the use of real-life examples, documents, interviews, and case studies; (2) by utilizing easily digestible language; and (3) through his strategic organization that repeatedly ties back to his thesis from start to finish.

With our ever-changing media and political climates and constant barrage of fake news accusations from former president Donald Trump, content moderators are key players when it comes to social media and the Internet. Central to Gillespie's text is the idea that content moderators create cultural boundaries and norms, and that algorithmic systems are always political, even if they are not intended to be. In their roles of promoting and censoring content, moderators can take measures such as banning hate speech and curbing trolling or cyberbullying. They can also silence the speech we want to know. They are the invisible gatekeepers or "custodians" behind the scenes that we never get to see. Content moderators function like the man behind the curtain in *The Wizard of Oz* or the school custodian that comes to clean at night when all the teachers, students, and administrators have gone home. Gillespie provides a well-laid-out map showing us how both our offline and online lives are molded by online platforms and Internet "custodians." In addition, applying his critical approach, he argues that we need to pay closer attention to, and focus more intently on, content moderators since they are invested with a great deal of power and can impact society.

Chapter 1, "All Platforms Moderate," situates the book by tracing the development of the Internet from its originally intended utopian design to the era platforms. Gillespie lays out his thesis in the first chapter, arguing that platforms cannot survive without moderation. Transitioning the focus more culturally and legally, chapter 2, "The Myth of the Neutral Platform" outlines how platforms were built and the limitations they impose on media and telecommunications law since platforms are not neatly classified as cultural or legal.

The following chapters all explore further how platforms organize communication and try to moderate their content. Chapter 3, "Community Guidelines or the Sound of No," examines how community guidelines exist solely as rhetorical markers rather than solidified guidelines. Chapter 4, "Three Imperfect Solutions to the Problem of Scale," focuses on the idea that platforms today support an astronomical amount of content. From this, different platforms implement different strategies, such as allowing users to report one another and detecting inappropriate content through machine learning. Chapter 5, "The Human Labor of Moderation," builds on chapter 4 and explains that another strategy to moderate content takes place by hiring people to filter content. Chapter 7, "To Remove or to Filter," also discusses how rather than deleting content altogether, social media corporations hire people to siphon content to target audiences.

Chapters 6 and 8 focus on real-life examples and recommendations moving forward. Chapter 6, "Facebook, Breastfeeding, and Living in Suspension," centers on the ways users are impacted by content moderation, highlighting how mothers posting breastfeeding selfies on Facebook were moderated and censored. The final chapter, chapter 8, "What Platforms Are, and What They Should Be," pushes readers to reimagine what they want from social media corporations and to consider how social and democratic conversations should occur on the platforms. In addition, Gillespie argues that platforms need accountability and outlines how this can be reimagined. He ends with some practical recommendations, including encouraging the hiring of more diverse platform designers, shifting agency from content moderators to users, and increasing transparency around content moderation. Finally, he calls on not only platforms but also individual users and society as a whole to take agency in their social media consumption and use.

Gillespie's work does six things particularly well. First, the writing is foundational for the field of Internet studies. In the post–Cambridge Analytica era, in which constant discussions about data privacy,

protections, and policies are happening, his work is situated perfectly. Similarly, the scope he provides regarding how social media evolved into its current state, as well as the passages in the book detailing the Internet's historical lineage offers rich context to readers. Playing into his previously stated points, the powerful examples he provides, such as mothers struggling to share breastfeeding selfies on Facebook, connects the content to real life. His eclectic mix of case studies, written documents, and interviews show how social media platforms, content moderators, and social media users do a delicate dance with each other and constantly shift the power dynamics. Showing individual solutions to content moderation on various platforms is exemplified through case studies. It is impactful to see these examples and compare the different approaches and solutions. In addition, Gillespie's language is accessible, readable, informative, and well researched, while his organization creates strong connections between chapters. Finally, his training in sociology brings a fresh cultural approach that other works within technology and Internet studies sometimes lack.

Though it is well written and organized, this book could be modified in two ways. First, there is little discussion about the basic organization and infrastructure of the Internet. Basic Internet design could have a huge impact on social media and cause limitations. For example, if Internet infrastructure wasn't built with interactivity in mind, content moderators might not be needed. In addition, while the book is informative and covers a wide range of topics, more in-depth interviews with platform designers, content moderators, and social media users would provide even deeper insight and a more complete view.

This book would be a great read for many audiences. At the university level, undergraduate or graduate students taking courses on technology or Internet studies would be ideal thanks to the book's accessible conceptual approach and readability. Within the industry, those working in the tech field, such as those building and designing platforms and formulating technology policies, would greatly benefit from understanding these power dynamics and how they might contribute to or deconstruct them. In general, anyone who has a social media account might find this book to be of value, as well as anyone curious or guarded about the power social media companies have in contemporary societies.

References

Roberts, S. T. (2019). *Behind the screen: Content moderation in the shadows of social media*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Suzor, N. P. (2019). *Lawless: The secret rules that govern our digital lives*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108666428