

Alexander Monea, **The Digital Closet: How the Internet Became Straight**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022, 263 pp., \$25.50 (hardcover), \$17.99 (eBook).

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I recommend Alexander Monea's ***The Digital Closet: How the Internet Became Straight*** for its thorough and insightful account of (as the subtitle reads) "*how the Internet became straight*." Although, as the author will inform you, the Internet never merely "became straight." It is designed that way. Through a deft interweaving of policy, platform, and discourse analysis, Monea provides a comprehensive account of how just about every content-sharing platform, from YouTube to Pornhub, economically caters to heteronormative sexuality and resultantly hides displays of *queer* sexuality that might offend hegemonic sensibilities. Through his account of a new, algorithmic heteronormativity, Monea contributes to the field of communication with novel approaches to theory and method that provide needed insight for studying social media platforms "beyond the black box." Even the theoretical and methodological limits to Monea's inquiry prove as useful parables of the challenges we face as communication researchers in the age of social media. In a moment defined by epistemological and political uncertainty, *The Digital Closet* provides a wonderful template for critical social media inquiry.



The Digital Closet theorizes the present experience of being a queer or trans person using digital content-sharing platforms as subjection to heteronormativity:

LGBTQIA+ individuals may be allowed to enter the digital public sphere but only so long as they bracket and obscure their sexual identities. Their very being is so pornographed by automated content filters that they are largely barred from sexual expression online. (p. 3)

This is the eponymous "digital closet." Across five chapters, Monea traces its development through a dialectic between state policy, economic decision making, and the cultural superstructure. Beginning with a recent history of politicized sexual morality in chapter 1, Monea provides an account of the contemporary antipornography movement and illuminates its intellectual roots in American conservatism, its relationship to the online "manosphere," and its political influence and policy agenda. In chapter 2, he describes how hegemonic heteronormativity is encoded into platform design, in no small part because the disproportionately White, male, and cis-hetero platform designers often hold conservative, authoritarian, "manospheric" beliefs about sexuality and gender themselves. As a product of their design choices (and the heteronormative culture informs them), we learn in chapter 3, "nearly every major internet platform today engages in systematic overblocking of sexual expression, which by default reinforces heteronormativity" (p. 115), often blocking even

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"legitimate nonsexual" (p. 112) LGBTQIA content. This overblocking is supplemented, as Monea points out, by the heteronormative beliefs of *human* content moderators. In the final chapter, Monea considers how technological and cultural rationales for heteronormativity motivate economic and public policy, leading lawmakers and multinational corporations alike to insist on "safety features" for platforms that paradoxically both invisibilize and "pornography" (in the verb sense, as Monea uses it) LGBTQIAs online.

While Monea's argument is both well-evidenced and socially righteous, it is hampered by his lack of a more explicit "queer theory." We know that he takes a more Cohenian (1996) or "intersectional" approach to "queerness," because he includes sex workers, kinksters, and other non-LGBTQIA sexual outcasts and misfits among the "queer" parties injured by the heteronormative Internet. And yet, he also invokes the LGBTQIA acronym as shorthand for the sexually-marginalized. My concern is that this work's emphasis on *heteronormativity* ignores the various ways that platform design and patriarchal culture produce digital "homonormativities" as well (e.g., see Abidin, 2019; Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016). The very same algorithmic and cultural stereotyping processes that identify LGBTQ people as a sexual minority whose self-expression requires moderation also identify us as a discrete consumer category. A cursory overview of the top pictures hashtagged #Instagay on Instagram will reveal that the "digital closet" may obscure most LGBTQ sexuality from public view, but nonetheless privileges, promotes, and otherwise hyper-visibility a commercialized, apolitical, (predominantly) White men's homoeroticism. While Monea at times comes close to acknowledging this contradiction (e.g., documenting an official Proud Boys statement implying admiration for (White) gay men "doing just fine for intercourse,"), he never directly addresses it (p. 46). The effect is that it leaves him advocating both passionately and effectively on behalf of a community whose membership is murky at best. Moreover, while queer theory has been extremely influential in humanistic and social science theory, its application remains limited in the field of communication, making the absence of any hands-on queer theorizing feel like even more of a missed opportunity.

Methodologically speaking, *The Digital Closet* is quite an accomplishment. Sociologists Tiziano Bonini and Alessandro Gandini (2020) describe digital platforms as "black boxes" made opaque to academic research. Their claim is predicated on the fact that one cannot "objectively" observe any medium that contorts itself to visually supply one's anticipated subjective desires (based, of course, on complex, algorithmic modeling). Moreover, the very algorithms that comprise this medium are corporate secrets to which no *critical* scholar will ever be given access. By turning his attention to discourse analysis, institutional analysis, and policy analysis, Monea contends with this opacity by providing a deeply descriptive account of the legal, economic, and cultural forces that shape platforms' design coupled with users' experiential accounts of how they navigate platforms and the challenges that they face. Through this method, Monea is able to analyze the features and policies of a wide array of platforms. The benefits to such an expanded scope of analysis are many, including the ability to compare policy and cultural effects across platforms, the inclusion of minority perspectives and experiences, and an account of how offline political and economic decision-making impacts individuals' experiences online.

Continuing the tradition of works like Virginia Eubanks's (2018) *Automating Inequality* and Safiya Noble's (2018) *Algorithms of Oppression*, Monea has provided fertile methodological and theoretical ground to probe the relationship between platform capitalism, sexuality, gender, and inequality. At the intersection of public policy and populist sexual conservatism, an algorithmic regime catering to heteronormative tastes

hides all but the most profitable kinds of queerness from public view on platforms like Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, and even Pornhub. And while we cannot observe this new heteronormativity through conventional means of observation, we can deduce its presence through a more macroscopic inquiry that locates the “meaning” of algorithms in their social causes and effects as much as their code. For those interested in social media inquiry that strives toward social justice, *The Digital Closet* provides an excellent framework. Overcoming methodological and disciplinary hurdles alike, it strives to uncover a truth about social media that is intentionally hidden from critical eyes. We would all do well to follow its example and learn from its lessons.

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