

Book Review

**Katrin Tiidenberg, Natalie Ann Hendry, and Crystal Abidin:
tumblr
Cambridge: Polity Books. 2021**

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The internet and social media scholars Katrin Tiidenberg, Natalie Ann Hendry, and Crystal Abidin have written a book full of insights about tumblr – a microblogging and social network platform launched in 2007. The book is interesting because it concerns a social medium that – despite having been somewhat commodified over the years – has (more or less) held on to its initial vision, focusing less on business and monetization and more on the interests, creativity, and community of its users. This has enabled a space for digital subcultures, where people can figure themselves out, participate in social movements, and find a (often political) voice. The main contribution of the book is simply its “thick” explorations and discussions of the unique cultural and social practices of tumblr, and the ways in which these practices are both facilitated and enacted by multiple, entangled material, and discursive forces, e.g., tumblr’s vision, business strategy, and technological possibilities as well as internal and external governance, societal discourses, contextual norms, and user relations. To understand the social and cultural practices of tumblr, the authors use the concept of “silosociality”, which emphasizes the community of tumblr as being structured around shared contextual practices, vernacular, and sensibilities, rather than around networked personalities. This contributes, according to the authors, to the uniqueness of tumblr in the social media landscape and enforces its ability to continuously facilitate and cultivate relevant and meaningful sub-communities for the users. These sub-communities center on phenomena such as fandom, social justice, NSFW (Not Safe for Work) content, and mental health – in ways that foster affirmation and acceptance of diversity, minorities, and eventually human existence as a whole.

All of this is discussed in the book and is of course relevant if one is interested in – or seeks to carry out studies that involve – tumblr, but many of the discussions also involve aspects and nuances that are relevant if one wants to understand how social media platforms and their social and cultural user practices are constituted through both material and discursive forces. As very little academic attention has been given to tumblr, this book is definitely a unique contribution to the field of media and communication studies, but the book is – as Tarleton Gillespie also states on the back of the book – “so much more than just an overview of tumblr”, as the authors constantly relate their observations of tumblr to other social media platforms, e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and reddit, which makes the discussions relatable and relevant for a wider variety of readers. Furthermore, the book is particularly valuable in order to understand how the contemporary digital saturation of human life contributes to producing people’s self-representations, identities, and communities, and why it also may be insightful for readers situated in sociology or psychology.

The book consists of an introduction, seven chapters, and a conclusion. The first chapter concerns tumblr’s digital features, functions, and affordances. Here, the authors lay the foundation for the rest of the discussions in the book by specifying and visualizing how tumblr is constructed as a social medium. The second chapter discusses silosociality in relation to a range of related concepts, e.g., “online communities”, “networked pub-

lics”, and “social worlds”. Hence, the authors unfold and refine the concept of silosociality further and emphasize that it is “not about the separation of content or user, but about separation of contexts” (p. 55) that are both felt and imagined by the users. Chapter three explores how attention is capitalized on tumblr, particularly how the flows of audience attention are generated and directed by the users’ contributions to the community, but also how attention is linked to the commercial activities on tumblr that involve monetizing strategies and revolve around advertisements, affiliate networks, and small businesses.

In the remaining chapters, the authors discuss some of tumblr’s key silos. Chapter four concerns fandom and the ways in which fan cultures are enacted and cultivated on tumblr. One interesting observation from the authors is how tumblr’s own contexts, features, and functions are discussed and cherished by the users in ways that demonstrate their love and longing for tumblr. Chapter five concerns the key silo of social justice, which is particularly focused on racism, feminism, sexual and gender diversity, body politics, ableism, and the intersectionality of all these social categories. Social justice, however, seems to underpin all of the silos on tumblr, and leads to various forms of tumblr activism, critical peer education, and democratic communication and conversations.

In chapter six, the authors discuss the NSFW (Not Safe For Work) community, centering on tumblr as a safe space for sexual expression that encourages body positivity and helps users learn about, and accept, their own and other people’s sexualities, to diversify their desires and worldviews, and to push back against the normative hegemonic representations. The authors’ admiration and affirmation of tumblr permeates their discussions, and their critical reflections of the unintended side-effects of such tumblr practices are few. Very little attention is, for example, given to the fact that NSFW content may travel across the internet with endless interpretations of who produced and shared it and how – and no attention is given to ways in which these practices sometimes end up reproducing or reinforcing those discourses and norms of sexuality and gender they initially sought to disturb. Chapter seven concerns practices of mental health and illness, particularly focused on the users’ personal narratives and lived experiences of hopefulness and hopelessness, including, e.g., self-harm and pro-anorexia images. Compared to the previous chapters, the authors discuss the ambiguity, complexity, and contradictions involved in this community and emphasize that it can be both “helpful and unhelpful for people, the conversations can be playful and insightful just as they may be distressing or uncomfortable” (p. 180).

Finally, the authors conclude that tumblr has offered a safe, educational, and therapeutic place for an uncountable number of young people. They furthermore return to one of the main points of the book and emphasize how tumblr’s unique features, functions, and affordances actively contribute to producing and shaping user practices and cultures on tumblr. In this way, the authors disrupt the idea that digital communities are matters of human agency alone. It is clear that the authors know a lot about tumblr and are immensely excited about the practices it facilitates – and they succeed in sharing

this with the reader. More critical reflections on some of the conflicts and contradictory discourses on the platform and their side-effects for the users in relation to *all* of the discussed practices would have increased the refinement and depth of the analyses. Still, the book is of utmost importance and relevance for anyone who wants to learn about tumblr or social media in general, or indeed anyone interested in how to approach and analyze the entanglements of human and non-human agencies and the ways in which these entanglements effect different forms of sociality in digital spaces.