PLATFORM GOVERNANCE OF ACCESS

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Governance as an analytical concept describes power shifts in media and communications policy-making (d'Haenens, Sousa, and Trappel 2018). Scholars have extended the concept of internet governance from regulatory institutions to new media service providers by reconsidering governance *by* social media platforms rather than *of* them (DeNardis and Hackl 2015). This case study contributes to the conceptual foundations of what constitutes platform governance with an assessment of access mediation through user policy and the technical affordances of APIs (application programming interface).

APIs are software features designed to mediate interactions between applications, data, and devices. More specifically, they are protocols, which are technical sets of rules that grant managed access between devices (van Dijck 2013). APIs are involved in nearly every transaction we encounter online and are quietly becoming one of the few methods remaining for collecting social media. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter use them to automatically control the exposure of data on their sites, authorizing access by some third parties while denying others.

API Access

Meaningful access allows individuals to learn what personal data is held about them, how it is being processed, and with whom it is (or may be) shared. Access therefore breathes life into most data rights. As a result, access rights occupy an important role in monitoring and enforcing the rules designed to govern information intermediaries (Ausloos and Dewitte 2018). Without knowing what data intermediaries have about us, and how they process it, we would have a hard time knowing what to delete or block, or exercising other data rights (Ausloos and Dewitte 2018).

The data should be portable so that it is legible and can be transferred to other formats and devices. For this reason, privacy statutes like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) require that data owners such as Facebook and Twitter comply by making data about subjects available in a machine-readable format. Platforms have chosen to meet this requirement by repurposing APIs for personal downloads.

This feature (which I call personal social media API downloads) is designed for use by account holders who want to collect the content of their social media accounts. However, in addition to individuals, researchers and archivists are depending on the method (they ask the account holders to download their personal data) to compensate for the limitation of access platforms impose on the collection and study of social media. Thus, they represent important sources of information and accountability now and in the future. Yet personal social media API downloads – along with APIs in general – are being implemented with little or no external validation of the results, or of the mediation

by platforms. In response, this inquiry assesses this method by examining accounts downloaded directly from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

Theoretical Frameworks, Methodology, and Application

The assessment is designed to be multi-dimensional by comparing the API download process with two supplemental methods for collecting social media – web archiving software Archive-It and Webrecorder. Both are archiving-as-a-service (AaaS) options and similar enough to compare and contrast in terms of theory-building (Maemura et al. 2018; Vaughan 2014). I analyze accounts belonging to a graduate student labor union organization, the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC). Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram hold the primary public record of the labor organization's history and activities; without them, few records of GWC would exist.

The inquiry is premised on three questions: 1.What data can be collected? 2.What data if any appears to be missing, obscured, or unknown? 3.What are the known and pressing issues associated with access to this data and its formats? Answers to these questions are assessed according to access rights, archivability, and data portability. Each is a meaningful framework in privacy legislation, past and present, that reflects the process for obtaining data, the quality of the data that can be obtained, and the inter/operability of the system.

The study employs the walk-through method, an analysis technique for examining an app both empirically and critically (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2016). By combining science and technology studies with cultural studies, the technique takes into account the vision, operating model, and modes of governance designed into an app or software package. Combining a social and technical framework can further our understanding of access mediation through the dual mechanisms of policy and the technical design affordances of automated systems like APIs, thus making conversations about participation in regulating platforms more tangible.

Overview of Findings

This study demonstrates that personal API downloads do not meet the criteria by which stakeholders have sought to govern platforms; and that platforms have sought ways to comply, whether intentional or not, without ceding to demands for accountability and transparency. Specifically, I argue based on my findings, that access rights, archivability, and data portability are not effective means for governing social media platforms or intervening in the asymmetrical relationships between platforms and their users. To the contrary, personal API downloads normalize platform mediation, thus promoting data subjects with little authority but who provide the raw materials and labor necessary to sustaining asymmetrical relationships within global digital networks. Yet, as the comparison with other collection methods demonstrates, alternative methods for acquiring social media are shrinking because platforms willingly employ APIs to block their access.

Platform governance of access raises questions about the methods and consequences of this mediation by social media service providers, which now occupy roles in our information infrastructures previously held by public (e.g. government agencies) and private ones (e.g. news media). Looking at the emergent issues identified with APIs not only assesses the quality of data accessible for archiving but also magnifies techniques of governance that platforms exercise in their attempts to exploit information, labor, and storage economies.

Thorny issues over posthumous storage and stewardship are perhaps the most tangible manifestation of governance issues but these platform companies occupy key roles in our information infrastructures. Looking at APIs through the platform governance lens illustrates platforms' attempts to comply on their own terms with external laws, while providing us with the opportunity to consider alternatives to being governed according to the interests of private information intermediaries via automated systems that enforce policies based on relentless flows of data.

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