



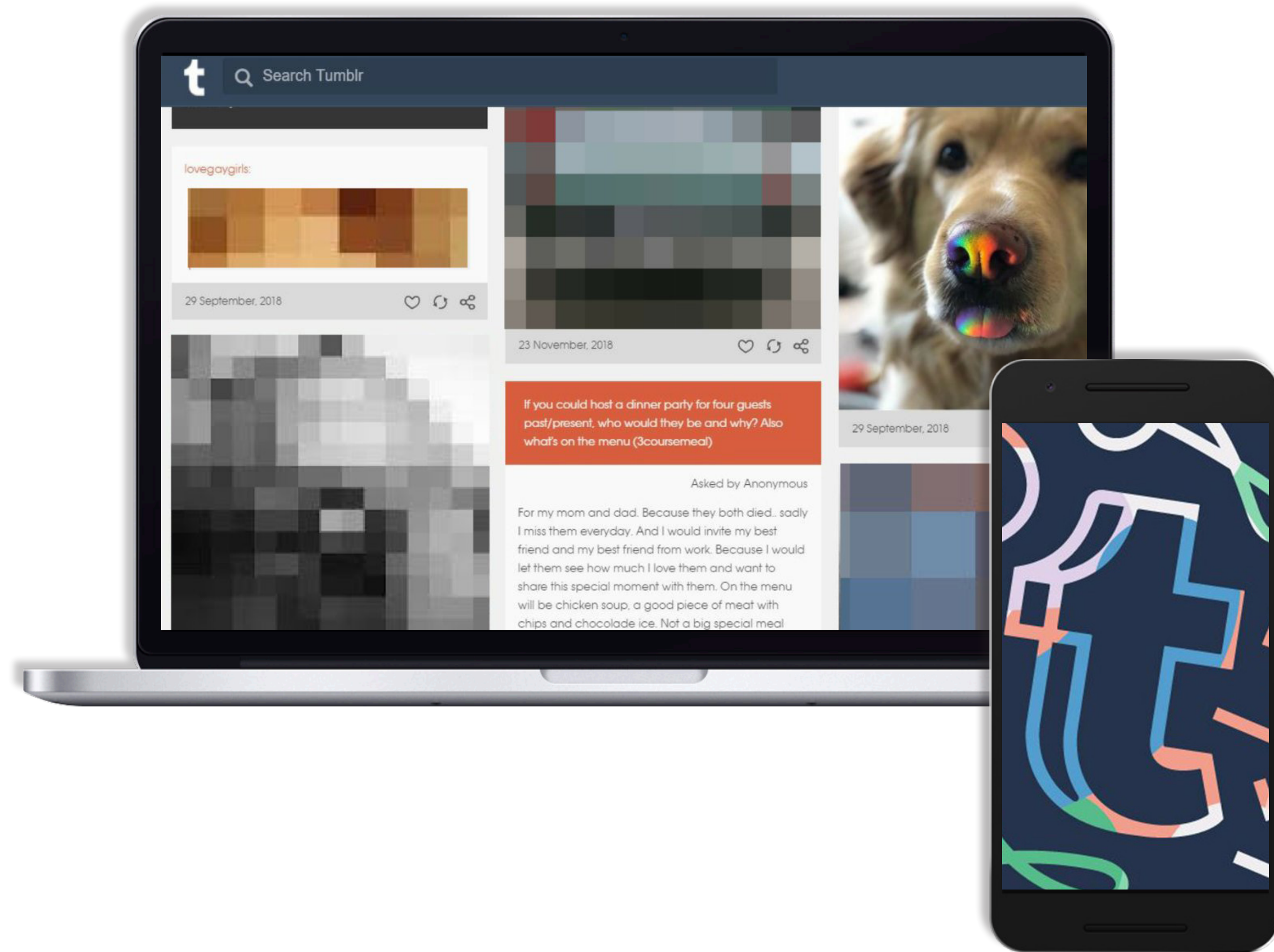
The Tumblr Porn Ban

Power Imbalances of Corporate Personhood



Introduction

Tumblr, a popular microblogging platform, had once been unique among social media platforms for its lax adult content policy. But in 2018 it updated its Community Guidelines to no longer allow such content, largely against the interests of its user community. Tumblr used the rhetorical strategy of corporate personhood to announce its updated adult content policy. By presenting this corporate person as if it were any other user, Tumblr created a false sense of equality and downplayed the inherent power imbalance present in the platform's ability to define itself contrary to the desires of its users.



Brief History of Tumblr

- 2007** - David Karp launches Tumblr as an alternative to long-form blogging platforms such as WordPress.⁶
- 2013** - Tumblr is purchased by Yahoo! for \$1.1 billion.⁷
- 2017** - Yahoo! (and its subsidiaries) is purchased by Verizon for \$4.48 billion.⁸
- December 2018** - Tumblr announces its new adult content policy, which goes into effect by the end of the year.

Literature Review

It had been widely thought that the Internet would completely revolutionize human interaction by creating spaces that were freely available, open, and equalizing.¹ But the reality of the Internet is one of corporatization, which limits these idealistic views.² Many social media companies use the term “platform” to downplay this corporate reality.³ All social media platforms regulate content, and serve as “gatekeepers” of the Web.⁴ Nevertheless, Tumblr had historically enforced fewer specific content regulations than other social media platforms. Tumblr's previously lax adult content policy had contributed to its status as an online queer space for identity play and expression.⁵

“We love Tumblr and the communities that call Tumblr home. You are Tumblr.”

“[T]his includes content that is so photorealistic that it could be mistaken for featuring real-life humans (nice try, though)”

“[W]e are sorry that this has not been an easy transition and we know we can do a better job of explaining what we're doing.”

“[W]e've given serious thought to who we want to be to our community moving forward...”

Implications

Tumblr had once been a unique platform that was an online space for LGBTQ+ people and groups.⁹ Regardless of Tumblr's intentions and motivations behind the new adult content policy, it affected actual people when the platform was no longer the queer space that it once was. The rhetorical strategy of corporate personhood enabled Tumblr to downplay this inherent power imbalance between the company and its users, a power relationship present for all social media platforms.

Objects of Study

The new policy was announced across several weeks in the form of multiple blog posts and web pages. This multi-textual nature creates fluidity in each text, as well as in authorship. To understand how Tumblr constructed a corporate person, I conducted close readings and textual analyses of several blog posts and web pages:

- Tumblr Staff** - December 3rd & December 17
- Tumblr Support** - December 3rd
- Tumblr Help Center** - “Adult Content” & “Reviewing and Appealing Content”

Defining the Corporate Person

The corporate person is positioned alongside its users, and presented as if it were equal to any other Tumblr user. For instance, the use of third-person pronouns is more typical of a natural person than a corporation and feels more personal. Across all the texts, a similar voice is present, including stylistic features such as the “<3” or “♥” sign-off at the end of most blog posts. The corporate person speaks with ambivalence, often mixing playfulness and seriousness such as its regular use of parenthetical asides. While in some ways Tumblr's corporate person is just like any other user, the corporate person still speaks and acts with the full force and authority of the company at large.

References

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