Facebook and the Napalm Girl: Reframing the Iconic as Pornographic

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Abstract
Facebook’s banning of the photo of the iconic Napalm Girl before it was reinstated due to public criticism of the social networking facility was a symbolic and material act of incursion on the sacred. It underscored the prowess of the technology firm as a platform for content sharing from breaking news to banal images where millions of images are shared and integrated through networked relationships and its circulation economy, re- framing and re-configuring social memory, history and morality. More importantly, it asserted the “technological gaze” of Facebook where its system of managing content can turn the sacred into puerile and the puerile into popular entertainment, flattening, and re-mapping content through its own moral sensibilities. This Facebook economy imposes its own morality through its “technological gaze,” and in the process thwarts our “projects of memory” opening up wider ethical challenges for society and humanity.

Keywords
Facebook, iconic, image economy, Napalm Girl, algorithm

Introduction
“Photographs, which fiddle with the scale of the world, themselves get reduced, blown up, cropped, retouched, doctor ed, tricked out” (Sontag, 1977). The renowned “Napalm Girl” as an iconic image with its part-mythic and part-sacred status encountered such a moment when Facebook banned it citing its “community guidelines,” reducing it to a prurient image of nudity on 9 September 2016. The Pulitzer prize-winning image shot by Associated Press Photographer Nick Ut entitled the “Terror of War” had been uploaded by Norwegian newspaper editor who had posted the photo as part of a series on war photography and when he had tried to re-post it, along with a response from Phuc (the “Napalm girl” herself), his account was suspended by Facebook (Ingram, 2016). Facebook subsequently restored the image after a public outcry. Nevertheless, the coding of the Napalm Girl as yet another nude image through its “community standards” and its subsequent removal are material and symbolic acts of incursion on the sacrosanct and iconic. Cultural artifacts as projects of collective memory and meaning-making solidify the sacred, enabling the means to re-enact the horror while instilling a lesson for humanity through time.

With the Napalm Girl incident, Facebook’s “community standards” collapsed the iconic imagery to pornography, stripping out context. In the process, the ban on Napalm Girl, albeit brief, invokes wider ethical challenges for humanity where the increasing circulation and accumulation of content on new and social media platforms, and its regulation through technological “intelligence” (i.e., algorithms, human censors, and not editors) and mnemonic memory, will leave us bereft of context, laying siege to our collective memory and morality. John Berger (1980) in About Looking proclaims, “Photo itself does not preserve meaning, only that which narrates us can make us understand.” The flow of huge volumes of content into the hands of capital enables it to impose new standards of morality in monitoring content divorced from social context and history, and in the process they re-code and re-order information. Facebook through its “technological gaze” dislodged the Napalm Girl from the sacred and re-configured her through the corporeal, crudely associating her with the prurient and pornographic. The world, on the other hand, remembered a child mutilated by war inscribed through the pornography of violence.
The “Napalm Girl” is not just another image—certainly not another nude image on the Internet. The “Napalm Girl” is an image of unmitigated horror where children, including 9-year-old Kim Phuc, are seen running from an aerial napalm attack during the Vietnam War. In fact, if you look closely at the picture there is no nudity but the raw full-frontal visuality of violence and trauma that foreshadow wars. As an image, it is a moment of collective failure of humanity and a call to conscience. A moment of collective reckoning. As an iconography of war, it embodies the sacred; an intimate spectacularization of the abject horror of chemical warfare on a helpless 9-year-old child who had torn off her clothes as the heat of the toxic chemicals bore into her skin—ingesting it. The image epitomized humanity’s confrontation with its own depravity evidenced in the melting flesh of the child. The naked embodiment of the war, personified through the child, removed spatial and temporal distance, making it an intimate and present encounter. The image equally embodied the zeitgeist of a weary public’s repudiation of the Vietnam War, both in and out of America.

The Napalm Girl image ran on the front pages of practically every newspaper and magazine in the world mobilizing public opinion against the war (Sims, 2016). It caused such a disjunction in public fatigue by the war that President Nixon questioned whether it was a fake (Time.com). Six months later, in January 1973, the United States, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam signed the Paris cease-fire agreement effectively ending the war. The sequence of events which ensued and the mobilization of moral condemnation of the war visualized through the imagery of the Napalm Girl meant that the image acquired cultural and social power even though a series of war imageries had preceded it. The image, in acquiring mythic qualities to freeze time and turn public opinion, came to occupy a sacred realm. Nick Ut in capturing the Napalm Girl through her trauma and in spectacularizing it to the rest of the world made her a phantasmagoric fatal figure entrapped within the prism of war and suffering. The “Napalm Girl” image entered the annals of social history as one of the most disturbing images of the 20th century. As such, the image came to occupy the sacrosanct in terms of social memory, where the collective act of remembering was needed as a redemptive tool against the horrors of war, and the infliction of terror and trauma on the innocent. Iconic images enact both violence and morality reifying the image through its transformative potential.

The photo also known as “Accidental Napalm” is undoubtedly one of the most famous photographs of Vietnam War and most widely recognized images in American photojournalism (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003). Facebook as an “American” technology company with a powerful global presence forgot its own “American” history with the Napalm girl incident. First, the Vietnam war is deemed as an “American war,” the calling to conscience was through “American photojournalism,” and significantly the girl had been “hit by American Napalm” as described by Susan Sontag (1977, p. 136). Facebook in banning the image disavowed what is intrinsic to the victimization in the photograph; that of American power and American brutality on foreign soil. In the words of Sontag (2003), “Remembering is an ethical art,” and the re-mediation of the world through a technological gaze presents ethical challenges of remembering for society and its projects of memory (p. 115). The saturation of content on a platform such as Facebook makes all images equal and hence governable through its technological gaze. It was nevertheless an amnesia of an American global company on a global stage. Facebook in confronting the Napalm image being posted on its site asserted that “An image of a naked child would normally be presumed to violate our community standards, and in some countries might even qualify as child pornography” (Havland & Seetharaman, 2016). The organization in stripping out the context and not recognizing the iconic value of the image had pressed a prurient as well as a deviant gaze on the war image. Facebook’s banning of the image and imposing its own morality codes can be read as an act of cultural inconoclasism re-coding the image as another naked body, stripping the context of the image, desecrating its reverential value and mythic status, and reducing it into the puerile through its own organizational morality. The banning of the Napalm Girl signifies the ways in which capital accumulates content, standardizes it through its own gaze, truncates the relationship with history and collective memory while manipulating it to maximize profits. If our collective memory and the visuality of the Vietnam War negotiated the taboo of nudity in newspapers and magazines with the Napalm Girl, Facebook stripped her into a mere nude image.

This article considers the moral and ethical challenges posed by capital’s re-configuration of the sacred through its own moral codes. With the accumulation of content whether banal or consequential in online platforms, technology companies such as Facebook can manipulate and re-categorize content according to their “technological gaze” divorced from social context and collective memory. It not only re-mediates our notions of the iconic and the sacred but equally lays siege to our moments of collective solidarity and morality as well. These acts of transgression of the sacred are equally about erasing collective memory, and testing our moral boundaries in enacting the sacred and profane as well as in re-ordering it through algorithms and organizational logic. In the process, the virality of technological platforms can leave societies saturated with content yet culturally and morally impoverished.

**Myth Making, Consecration, and Photojournalism**

The history of the Napalm Girl image offers a point of entry into a set of interlocking questions about the place of the Vietnam War in the American national imagination, as well as the role of iconic images in the construction of national memory (Miller, 2004, p. 262). The Vietnam War or the Second Indochina War which occurred in Laos, Cambodia, and
Vietnam since 1955 was fought between North Vietnam and South Vietnam, with the former supported by the Soviet Union, China, and other communist allies, while the latter had the support of the United States, the Philippines, and anti-communist allies. In the course of the war, the United States conducted a large-scale strategic bombing campaign against North Vietnam in its endeavor to prevent communist taking over South Vietnam as part of its wider cold-war strategy to stop the spread of communism. The war polarized public opinion in America, producing an anti-Vietnam war movement which questioned the rationality of American involvement in Vietnam. The Vietnam War had extracted a huge human cost with war fatalities totaling to millions. The Napalm photograph appeared during a period when “public was recognising the US government was waging war without purpose, without legitimacy and without an end, with the increasing configurations of liberal individualism such as personal autonomy and human rights becoming dominant in public culture” (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003, pp. 38–41). The image in 1972 did not accrue in isolation. In fact, the weary public had already been exposed to a series of grueling images of civilian pain and victimhood inscribing the Vietnam War as an immoral cause. The images of the Mai Lai Massacre in 1968, for example, where more than 500 unarmed women, children, and elderly men were shot and killed by American soldiers portrayed the magnitude of civilian victimhood even before the Napalm image.

Significantly, the Vietnam War is framed through Napalm gas which became a weapon of choice in the long-running ideological battle. America dropped some 388,000 tons of Napalm, compared to 32,357 tons on Korea and 16,500 tons on Japan (Neer, 2013, p. 11). Harvard University scientists created Napalm in 1942 in their push to help the war efforts and secure government funding. In effect, Harvard’s academics had invented a weapon that roasted people alive, cooked into blackened, fused chips of humankind (Neer, 2013). Napalm generates temperatures of 800–1,200°C, and when used as part of an incendiary weapon causes severe burns. The photographer, Nick Ut, describes the burns in disturbingly close language: “Her (i.e. Napalm Girl) the whole back, neck and arm were black like a barbecue” (Miller, 2004, p. 272). A distinct feature of Napalm is that it sticks to human skin with no practical method for removal of the burning substance. As such, it was deemed effective on the Vietcong hideouts (due to their guerrilla tactics) along with the herbicide Agent Orange in clearing out vegetation for pilots to identify their bombing targets. Napalm eventually came to symbolize the brutality of the Vietnam War for its devastating effects on the population and environment.

As such, the Vietnam War as a distant war for the Americans was inscribed through the notions of “Othering.” Stella Coram (2013) decries “real” violence as the domain of the “East,” whereas violence of the United States is imaginary, depicted in film, an aberration derived from exposure to moral decay and the horrors of war. Although Napalm had been tested in the Second World War on Germany, America dropped most of its Napalm on Asia: Japan in 1945, Korea in the 1950s, and Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s (Neer, 2013). Robert Neer (2013) in his book, Napalm, recounts how American pilots in Vietnam would have a can of ice-cold Budweiser in between Napalm strikes as ground crew restocked the Napalm bomb pods. The Napalm Girl as an image was amenable to various readings. It provided Western viewers with the kind of spectacle that is familiar to us: the female body as an object of gaze, and third world suffering as a display or show (Sontag, 2003). While the world came to read the image through the brutality of war on a child, the image undoubtedly confronted editorial propriety against nudity when it first appeared in the newsroom or indeed through the camera lens, and acquired a transcendental value in negotiating and overlooking it. Its cultural values undoubtedly rest in the transcendence which Facebook sought to revoke.

The image as such transcended an obvious reading of nudity aside for a moral purpose (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003, p. 41). Its cultural values undoubtedly rest in the transcendent which Facebook sought to revoke. In the photographer Nick Ut’s own words,

It would not be an overstatement to proclaim that the image caused its fair share of anxiety in its time in the editorial room. So much anxiety that it did not almost run. It was feared the child’s nudity would be offensive in terms of exhibiting “frontal nudity” prompting airbrushing out the shadow in the photograph that suggested the existence of pubic hair on the 9-year-old (Miller, 2004, p. 271). While publishing the Napalm Girl’s image ignited newsroom debates about nudity, many of the newspapers and magazines overrode their policies in recognizing the significance of the image (time.com). The trauma of the image transcended editorial rules on nudity through a general consensus about it signifying the atrocities of a needless war. The nudity became secondary to the corporeal violence which had been inflicted on her. Hariman (1995) argues that the Napalm Girl transgressed news media’s laws of propriety in stripping off her clothes, but in doing so her non-prurient nudity revealed the brutality of war. The photo violated one set of norms in order to activate another: Propriety is set aside for a moral purpose (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003, p. 41). The image as such transcended an obvious reading of nudity through the context of war and its brutality as witnessed through the trauma on children. This transcendence is an intrinsic quality of this iconography of war—a moment when the world saw abject violence inflicted on a child. The nudity was collectively abrogated by world audiences through the dominant readings of the immorality of the war in Vietnam. Facebook in its material act of banning the image desecrated this historic moment of transcendence.
The child, according to Jenks (2005, p. 6), “has come to symbolize all that is decent and caring about a society” and from a Western perspective, the child is seen as “both the embodiment of innocence and purity and an investment in the future” (Wyness, 2006, p. 14). Due to this, visual representations of the child can play a powerful role in eliciting engagement, and can be used to effectively reinforce/create a collective identity and motivation for collective action (Jones 2014). The Internet, with its vast repository of content without editorial oversight, leaves the child, particularly a nude child dominantly within prurient readings, reducing complex contexts within the pornographic. The figure of the child within the Internet is often collapsed through moral readings of victimhood and pornography. Kim the 9-year-old protagonist in the Napalm Girl encountered a similar fate on the Internet. Where photojournalism used judgment and editorial propriety, the Internet struggled to look beyond the corporeal, highlighting a bias in the medium against both children and nudity.

Criticisms of photography as a signifier of an event and its ability to represent the real have been debated throughout its inception as a technology. Photography has remained a contentious device in remembering history, and yet its ability to have canonical value where it can represent the limits of horror imbues it as a cultural artifact laden with the values and sensibilities of a community. Iconic photographs such as the Napalm Girl signify a transformative moment and hence acquire a mythic quality of sustaining a belief system; to memorialize human acts of depravity, to suspend the temporal, or to transcend boundaries both physical and ideological. Through the propagation of its mythic quality, it becomes in many ways sacred. Photojournalists in creating transformative moments where they sustain and capture the euphoria of human communion become myth makers. While journalism has been theorized through the fourth estate and its role as a moral guardian holding powers accountable, we need to equally underscore their role as story tellers and myth makers (Knightley, 2004) where their craft is equally implicated in binding the mythic through text and imagery. As such, journalism is intricately implicated in enacting the sacred, in particular the image archives which come to occupy the sacrosanct moral guardian holding powers accountable, we need to equally underscore their role as story tellers and myth makers (Knightley, 2004) where their craft is equally implicated in binding the mythic through text and imagery. As such, journalism is intricately implicated in enacting the sacred, in particular the image archives which come to occupy the sacrosanct

### Facebook Visuality and Morality

The rise and rise of Facebook and its dominance as a platform for sharing, intimacy, maintaining connections with friends and those with similar interests have consequences for society and humanity. The human imagined through a ubiquitous environment of non-stop engagement and intimacy with technologies enters a different relationship with content in terms of production, sharing, and dissemination. The human interactions with data and content on the Internet, particularly on social networking sites, become integrated into a content sharing economy where he or she is producing, consuming, and sharing content but equally becoming part of the assemblage in disseminating content through his or her networks. As such, an attention economy emerges through “friendship” networks on social media sites such as Facebook.

Sharing the intimate, banal as well as the consequential, means millions of data and content pass through these sites, constructing them as dissemination platforms for all types of content in maintaining and renewing personal connections. The advent of social networking sites tapped into a postmodern world wary of strangers and loneliness yet a society equally hungry to re-imagine sociality. Despite increased connectivity through technologies and better transportation, neighborhoods as gated communities and increasing sense of distrust with authority and humanity made social networking sites a means to re-imagine sociality as people lived more isolated life. Locked front doors and increased protection against strangers in our own living rooms gave rise to an insatiable appetite to a ubiquitous sociality mediated through technologies such as social networking sites where people learned to premise sharing intimate details of their lives without the attendant physicality of human encounters.

The disembodiment of the Internet equally allowed a teleported sociality where the self could be re-imagined as a social self where sharing, friendships, and networks could re-affirm presence and a sense of community. Social networking sites became seductive regimes in postmodernity which premised both individuality through a profile culture and sharing through networks. As such friendships, sociality, sharing, and the sense of self became re-negotiated with new rules online while merging with offline norms. In the process, these social formations were being abstracted by capital where social exchanges of information would be monetized through the sharing of private data on public platforms. The accumulation and circulation of content provided the means to create huge volumes of traffic where data could be mined and re-sold to advertisers producing a means to refine advertising through the personalization of data and to broaden the marketing base, while exploiting people’s insatiability to connect and be connected.

The advent of web 2.0 enabled the sharing of data and images (both static and moving) through multi-media platforms where the convergence of mobile technologies enabled lives to be transacted through text and imagery non-stop. Digital images which can be captured with ease and uploaded became a means to represent the self, its experiences, and aesthetics. Thus, sociality on social networking sites premised the image, where these became a means to aestheticize and
represent the “self,” and connect with the wider world. The creation of profiles, the anchoring of personal networks and friendships through social networking sites sought to impress users that these domains were personalized giving them a sense of belonging, even though these were spaces owned by corporations which were monetizing people’s personal transactions by selling their data and consumption patterns to commercial companies (Ibrahim, 2008, 2010). There is often a tendency among users to be not fully cognizant that these spaces are governed by the companies’ user agreements which impose their own codes of conduct and their own morality forming a “technological gaze” in which content can be managed by people (acting as censors) and algorithms.

Over these years, social networking sites such as Facebook have become sharing sites for personal and public content, as a means to signpost the important and trivial through networked attention economies producing ways to disseminate quickly where content can go viral through the “word-of-mouth” online. The binding of production and distribution economies between news organizations and social networking sites (see Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012; Singer et al., 2011) produced both moments of unease where news production and dissemination became open ended, adding to the euphoric discourses about the Internet and empowerment where the citizen could be re-configured as a journalist. The hybrid figure of the “citizen journalist” produced seismic confusion where the idea inspiring the possibilities to oust news on the ground was equally disruptive to the profession, signifying a threat to the very elements which defined its professional standards of practice and trust (i.e., the removal of standards of accuracy, authenticity, and objectivity). By baptizing everyone with the ability to create content as a journalist, the profession encountered its phase of “castration anxiety” in a Freudian sense. But the binding of news (i.e., production, dissemination, and ousting) with (and through) social networking sites remains firmly entrenched turning technology firms into news content sharing sites while exploiting the attention economy of closed and open networks and the trust and interest which can be engendered through these sites. News entered a realm of digital socialization where the bearer of the news was the person you knew and trusted. The integration of social ties into news dissemination and reception started a revisiting of classic reception theories such as Lazefeld’s two-step flow where receptivity to news is mediated through authority figures and those one would trust in the community. All these happened while social networking sites were monetizing people’s exchanges and transforming themselves into platforms where news “trended,” where what makes the headlines could be manipulated with humans and algorithms. As news organizations expanded their online presence to cut down operating costs, the news content circulation has become entwined with social networking sites as news is shared through networks, succumbing to its virality, and where newsfeeds and the popularity of content are not tested through the rigor of editorial or journalistic standards.

Facebook flitting between its identity as a technology company and a platform which handles large amounts of news content invariably places it in a contentious space. It becomes intimately implicated in flattening data and stripping out context, and in equally blurring the lines between the amateur and the professional and the attendant knowledge economies which can be produced with and through social networking sites. Its interventions through its “community standards” as such can be irreverent of public sentiments or social and historic contexts, and in the case of the “Napalm girl” incident iconoclastic. Social networking sites as spaces of neoliberal regimes extracting free labor to boost the agenda of capital and algorithms as part of “fixed capital” which intensify capital’s accumulation and monetization of exchange have been explored by Marxist critiques of the Internet (see Davies, 2013; Fisher, 2009; Terranova, 2014). As such, algorithms can extract not just use value but also aesthetic, existential, social, and ethical values (Terranova, 2014, p. 382). Terranova (2014, p. 381) contends that users themselves are cast as quasi-automatic relays of a ceaseless information flow entering a realm of exploitation where free labor is abstracted from leisure pursuits. The Marxist critique of capital’s exploitation of free labor on the Internet acknowledges the accumulation of content in social networking sites and equally the management of information through algorithms which become an extension of capital’s logic to intensify the extraction of value in monetizing networked exchanges. Hence, the algorithm as a form of pre-mediated logic and formula of capital projects the values of organizations in coding and cataloging information. Algorithms as non-neutral entities bear the teeth mark of capital. While discourses of the Internet celebrated discourses of empowerment and holding to account, the intense quest to monetize the Internet was also closely related to clandestine algorithms which ordered information on an industrial scale. Our utopian notions of the Internet as open and democratic were in tandem subsumed through the secrecy of algorithms performing to the logic of capital as a form of trade secret which could be protected by commercial regulations. Algorithms as a hidden code behind platforms such as Facebook perform by extracting certain attributes which will drive traffic and maximize a networked attention economy. In view of this, algorithms are complex, hidden, closely guarded, non-static, and iterative in moving with the logic of capital (see Diakopoulos, 2015; Lievrouw, 2012).

In terms of the workings of news organizations, there is increased enmeshing of social networking sites with news production and dissemination where news is increasingly curated from other sites and a means to mine the vast amounts of information that can accrue online. The curating of vast amounts of information out there is seen as a service to filtering credible content while signposting audiences to what might be worth their attention in these networked
platforms. This attention economy needs to be constantly fed, and the flow of information is integral to its sustenance. Additionally, news organizations are attuned to information that can be ousted on the ground through social networking sites, particularly when there is no access to information in physical sites. This complex binding of production, dissemination, and curation of news content with and through social networking sites has enmeshed news production with social networking sites in complex ways. A particularly crucial dimension has been the visible absence of editorial oversight in social networking sites, despite the vast amounts of news content which flow through user interactions, on one hand, and the tendency to drive attention to news stories in newspapers through these social networking platforms, on the other.

Social networking sites as conduits for vast amounts of content without the attendant editorial oversight remain an intrinsic challenge for societies in the digital age. Facebook has come under much scrutiny in terms of its editorial decision making, particularly with the company’s trending news list where it has been accused of manipulating trending topics. Facebook reportedly fired some 18 contractors responsible for curating topics for the list after accusations of bias and replaced them with algorithm (Havland & Seetharaman, 2016). This replacement has been the source of much embarrassment for the company due to a string of errors, including the sharing of hoax stories. Facebook’s algorithm has also been criticized for being amenable to partisan publications which spin the news into shareable stories which are inaccurate (Vincent, 2016). In response, Facebook has defended itself as a “tech company and not a media company” (Baral, 2016). According to Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook,

> When you think about a media company, you know, people are producing content, people are editing content, and that’s not us. We’re a technology company. We build tools. We do not produce the content. We exist to give you the tools to curate and have the experience that you want, to connect with the people and businesses and institutions in the world that you want. (cf. Baral, 2016)

The emphasis on sharing and curation rather than the quality and accuracy of content along with its notion of making content available that is of “public interest” has entrapped Facebook into a long history of social and ethical controversies, particularly with relevance to the image economy on its networking platform.

Journalism is intimately implicated in the building of collective memory in reporting historical media events. In contributing to the archives, our collective memory and myth making as well as the enactment of the sacred, they play an important role in society in providing access to events and a wider world. The role of artifacts such as newspapers in shaping a sense of an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991) as well as the role of broadcasting in constructing a shared sense of time (Scannell, 1996) underscores the cultural and social importance of news production in different ways, but equally how it mediated the spatial and temporal consciousness of humanity. With the advent of social networking sites and convergence of technologies where mobile technologies can be encoded to the body, consumption of content becomes ubiquitous and ritualized through the patterns of human body, and as such both the sense of space and time are re-configured. News content equally enters a realm of sociality where it competes with other information which flows through these sites. News is socialized, personalized, made intimate and equally flattened through the saturation of information on social networking sites. Equally it is re-mediated through the technological gaze of social networking sites which can impose their morality and sensibilities. This re-mediation of the historic and iconic will inevitably be a constant threat on the sacred.

Images, Nudity, and Facebook Morality

With millions of images flowing through Facebook, the company often appropriates a discourse of maintaining its community standards when things go wrong. Often, the discourse of community standards provides a shield of morality in defending its actions given its trajectory of controversies regarding its image governance over time. One salient example is the long tussle Facebook had with breastfeeding images when these were banned under its nudity clause, imposing a sexualized reading of the nipple rather than inserting it into a natural maternal act of nurture (see Ibrahim, 2010). While it relented to public pressure in allowing breastfeeding images subsequently, it had initially objected to breastfeeding images banning the nipple on the grounds that it violated its “community standards” which bars nudity. Facebook’s technological gaze defines deviance through its simplistic coding of the corporeal body through its nudity clause and by bracketing out the social context. In 2015, the company clarified that it will “always allow photos of women actively engaged in breastfeeding or showing breasts with post-mastectomy scarring” (Moss, 2015).

Nudity has been a recurring issue of contention for Facebook. In 2015, a French court agreed to hear a case from a school teacher who sued Facebook for taking down a photograph of Gustave Courbet’s nude statue “L’Origine du Monde.” Facebook again amended its policy, announcing that it will “allow photographs of paintings, sculptures, and other art that depicts nude figures” (“Facebook Clarifies Rules on Violence, Nudity,” 2015). However in stark contrast to the controversies over the nipple, nudity, breastfeeding, and mastectomy images, Facebook has allowed the posting and retention of violent and gory images on its site in the name of public interest.

In 2012, a 17-page document was leaked to the exposé website Gawker (now defunct) by a disgruntled employee of ODesk, an outsourcing company which censors content for Facebook with labor from third-world countries such as...
Philippines, Mexico, Turkey, India, and Morocco. Paid US$1 per hour to trawl through the reported transgressions from users, these human censors determine whether they should be removed from the site or not (Chen, 2012). The 17-page manual is a directive which workers for oDesk use in policing posts and image when anyone clicks a “report” button. The report revealed a confused approach to censoring where sex is banned, but violence and gore are permitted. In contrast to Facebook’s community guidelines which outlined its broad approach to what is acceptable, the leaked catalog went into specific details. For example, it allowed “graphic images” of animals if shown “in the context of food processing or hunting as it occurs in nature.” Similarly, pictures of bodily fluids are not permitted, but “deep flesh wounds” and “crushed heads, limbs” are acceptable (“as long as no insides are showing”), as are images of people using marijuana but not those of “drunk or unconscious” people (Arthur, 2012).

The outsourcing of labor to censor images points to both the vast amounts of images which saturate the site and equally the wide spectrum of images which can be problematic in terms of maintaining a coherence to image governance. Facebook in response to the leaked document announced that

In an effort to quickly and efficiently process the millions of reports we receive every day, we have found it helpful to contract third parties to provide precursory classification of a small proportion of reported content. These contractors are subject to rigorous quality controls and we have implemented several layers of safeguards to protect the data of those using our service. Additionally, no user information beyond the content in question and the source of the report is shared. We have, and will continue, to escalate the most serious reports internally, and all decisions made by contractors are subject to extensive audits. This document provides a snapshot in time of our standards with regards to one of those contractors, for the most up to date information please visit our Community Standards page. (cf. Arthur, 2012)

Facebook has faced continual criticism for allowing violent and graphic content to remain on the site under the guise of public interest when in effect these may often be a means to drive traffic to the sites, particularly when they relate to current news and media events, bearing in mind that the site permits videos and images from news reports and documentaries depicting abuse, murders, and terrorist activities (Gibbs, 2015). In 2013, Facebook lifted a temporary ban on gory images, such as beheadings, arguing that such images are permissible on its site as long as the content posted in a manner is intended for its users to “condemn the acts rather than celebrate them” (Oreskovic, 2013). Facebook nevertheless repealed this decision shortly after public backlash, admitting that its approach was flawed as hosting such content “improperly and irresponsibly glorifies violence.” Facebook had briefly experimented with adding a more basic form of warning sign to clips of decapitations in October 2013 after UK ex-Prime Minister David Cameron asserted that “It’s irresponsible of Facebook to post beheading videos, especially without a warning.” Clips showing decapitations taking place were later banned altogether (Kelion, 2015).

In 2015, Facebook released new community standards to provide clarification on objectionable content, asserting that it will “remove graphic images when they are shared for sadistic pleasure or to celebrate or glorify violence” (“Facebook Clarifies Rules on Violence, Nudity,” 2015). At the end of 2014, it began placing warning messages over videos and photos deemed to contain graphic images that could “shock, offend and upset,” and it only applied these to content violent in nature and not to explicit videos. The warning is only placed on content that has been flagged by users and which is not deemed in breach of the site’s terms and conditions after review by Facebook. The alerts prevent the videos from automatically playing in feeds unless they are clicked, unlike other clips. The initiative began rolling out in December 2014 as a means to prevent potentially distressing videos from being viewed automatically. Previously, such content would have auto-played on the site. The site is also preventing graphic videos and photos from being shown to any user who has identified himself or herself as being under 18 years of age in view of the fact that the social network permits users to sign up for accounts from the age of 13 years. Nevertheless, younger users can circumvent age verification to create accounts and video content (Gibbs 2015; Kelion, 2015).

In addition to broadcasting moving images, Facebook has been increasingly entangled with live streaming of violent images through its livestreaming service launched in 2016, which has been a powerful means of reaching millions (Kuchler, 2016). The site, for example, livestreamed the death of African American teenager Philando Castile. This real-time streaming service again positions the company as a live broadcaster without editorial structures and judgments (Kuchler, 2016), renewing calls for it to behave like a news organization and to have an ethical responsibility over its content.

Another phenomenon which is testing Facebook’s governance of nudity is revenge porn, with the site recently taken to court in Belgium by a 14-year-old girl over naked images. This case centers on the claim that Facebook is liable for the publication of a naked picture of the girl posted repeatedly on a “shame page” as an act of revenge. According to the lawyers handling the case, the photograph allegedly extracted through blackmail was removed by Facebook several times after being reported, but it had not been permanently blocked (Topping, 2016). Once images are online, they can be copied and re-posted to dozens of other sites, making total removal extremely challenging (Topping, 2016). The case is expected to open floodgates for other civil claims. In another relevant incident in 2016, an Italian revenge pornography victim, who won a case to have material removed from search engines and social networks including Facebook, killed herself (Mortimer & Forster, 2016).
In terms of child pornography, Facebook uses PhotoDNA to block known child abuse images, but other potentially problematic images, such as those in revenge pornography cases, have to be reported and “reviewed” before they are taken down. Facebook has been criticized for not doing more to protect users from repeated harassment as it waits until pictures have been reported. Presently under European Union (EU) law, social media sites are immune from liability for content as long as they react quickly to complaints under a “notice and takedown” mechanism (Topping, 2016).

Facebook, in utilizing the gaze of the community in raising objections to the images, equally attributes users the responsibility of sharing and policing. Facebook employs the discourse of “sharing responsibly,” and has worked with charities to target pedophiles with its “think before your share” campaigns. The shifting of vetting responsibilities to users preserves its moral position while diverting the onus of the moral guardianship to users. According to Facebook,

> When people share things on Facebook, we expect that they will share it responsibly, including choosing who will see that content. We also ask that people warn their audience about what they are about to see if it includes graphic violence. In instances when people report graphic content to us that should include warnings or is not appropriate for people under the age of 18, we may add a warning for adults and prevent young people from viewing the content. (Gibbs, 2015)

Facebook’s moral governance of images through its community standards has entailed a mix of strategies from employing outsourced censors in the third world to the use of identification software to recognize known child pornography images to the use of algorithms and the recently discharged human curators of content. The other basis on which it primarily governs images is through its user community standards and its communal gaze as a form of informal policing where people can report objectionable images and where these will be assessed against its own internal acceptability standards. With millions of images swimming in its platform and where images attract traffic and the monetization of data, having a heavy hand or editorial oversight with images is not the option for Facebook. Where the algorithm performs as an ahistorical and amoral tracking tool, the community of users is co-opted in policing its platform. In effect, Facebook extracts aesthetic and moral labor from its users, assessing affect and morality through their reactions while appropriating a paternalistic stance of requesting them to share and consume responsibly, while commodifying moving and static images as a means to drive traffic and interaction. Hence, its technological gaze is based on constantly testing the boundaries between what the society deems as sacred and profane, and in the process its technological gaze premises a community standard which is blind to historicity and morality, and increasingly a community it may seek to represent.

The constant testing of boundaries where the sacred is desecrated or the profane prevails in the guise of its community standards or “public interest” will entail a constant incursion on our collective memory and morality, impressing Facebook’s tendency to destroy myths and sacred sites through the cultural violence of flattening content. Facebook’s banning of the Napalm Girl is a representation of this mechanized technological gaze and its attendant morality where the sacred will swim alongside the puerile and pornographic until it is rescued through public outrage and outcry against its cultural iconoclasm.

**Conclusion**

The banning of the Napalm Girl as an objectionable image under its nudity clause by Facebook needs to be interpreted as an act of incursion on the sacred. As human societies and our collective memories become increasingly re-ordered by technology companies and their sense of morality, we will be faced with a world where our sense of the sacred and profane will be increasingly blurred, re-ordered, and desecrated. War iconography and war reporting including photo-journalism create moments of reification where redemption through collective memorialization becomes an act of absolution against human depravity and perversion. The tampering of social memory and sacred sites processed through digital platforms illuminates the culturally subversive nature of the technological gaze and sacred sites processed through digital platforms illuminates the culturally subversive nature of the technological gaze of capital, impressing the urgency for human editorial discernment and oversight where these are increasingly replaced by algorithms and organizational logic.

This interweaving of the technological gaze enforced through a digital architecture with a dialectical mix of autonomy and control monetizes aesthetic and moral labor while re-configuring our notions of sociality and morality saturating our solitary worlds with data, both banal and consequential. We become re-codified as data while being abstracted into a wider data economy which imposes new taxonomies on information and knowledge. The accumulation of content on online platforms, and the re-ordering and cataloging of these through search engines, algorithms, and “community standards” of technology companies which trade news, information, and human data and relationships according to their “technological gaze” divorced from social context and collective memory will present innumerable ethical and moral challenges for societies and humanity at large in postmodernity by dislodging our notions of the iconic and the sacred but equally laying siege to our redemptive moments of collective solidarity in expiating and repudiating human acts of depravity.

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