Journal of Mobile Media
http://wi.mobilities.ca

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Wi: Journal of Mobile Media 2016 10: 01

The online version of this article can be found at:

http://wi.mobilities.ca/digitalrefuse/

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Abstract

The story of a rogue Canadian garbage barge attempting to offload illegal garbage in the Philippines opens this article on techno-trash, in order to underline both the relationships between countries of the Global North with countries of the Global South in matters of waste, as well as to reframe discussions of techno-trash as fundamentally tied to material things. The definition of techno-trash is then expanded, to cover digital detritus created through an entirely digital set of practices I term "Commercial Content Moderation" (CCM). The attempt to offload mounds of e-waste and the similar ways in which a great deal of physical trash circulates around the globe are then directly connected to the kind of disposal that CCM workers do, increasingly undertaken in sites like the Philippines, the Business Process Outsourcing (or BPO) capital of world. Such e-waste arrives in the archipelago for dismantling, repurpose and storage, alongside outsourced CCM. These physical objects now deemed "waste" were once crucial to the production of the very material for which CCM workers now screen and remove.

Canada Calling: From Adult Diapers to E-waste

In the Customs port of busy international shipping hub Manila Harbor, the contents of a barge of Canadian origin has sat, blocking traffic and without welcome, for over two years. Its cargo consists of 50 shipping containers full of Canadian refuse, including

dirty adult diapers (Hopper, 2014), illegal to import into the Philippines and originally shipped from Vancouver by Jim Makris and his company, Chronic, Inc., under the guise of being recyclable materials (Goodman, 2015). It has been the source of diplomatic wrangling as its owner has refused to take it back, the Canadian government has claimed both lack of jurisdiction and lack of funds for garbage repatriation, and Filipino authorities refuse to let it enter their country. It is a mountain of garbage that is stateless and without a home, although its origins, in a wealthy developed country in the global North, are well known. It putrefies in the tropical heat of Manila's climate, and directly contravenes the Basel Convention of 1989, explicitly designed and enacted to prevent developed nations from offloading their hazardous refuse in the Global South ("Basel Convention," 2011). The mountains of filth have been the subject of protests and the stuff of political procedure: the episode was the subject of a Filipino Senate inquiry on September 8th, 2015. And while some 29 of the 50 cargo containers of hazardous refuse have now been dumped within the Philippines, no all-encompassing resolution has been found and the stalemate around the remaining trash continues.

Fig 1. Dirty adult diapers, hospital hazardous refuse and other garbage of Canadian origin rots and pours out of shipping containers impounded by Customs in Manila, Philippines, as environmental advocacy group Ban Toxics! calls for repatriation of the mess. Credit/Source: @BANToxics Twitter feed.

I open this article, in a special issue dedicated to techno-trash, with the story of the Canadian garbage barge in order to underline both the relationships between countries of the Global North with countries of the Global South in matters of waste, as well as to reframe the subsequent discussion of techno-trash as one fundamentally tied to material things. While my own research focus is on an entirely digital set of practices I term "Commercial Content Moderation" that involve, simply put, *taking out the digital trash*, I see the story of the attempt to offload this mound of garbage (other such efforts had

apparently been successful in the past) as similar to the way a great deal of physical trash circulates around the globe, from sites of generation to sites of disposal. There is also a direct connection between the kind of disposal that CCM workers do – many of whom are increasingly located in the Philippines, the Business Process Outsourcing (or BPO) capital of world (D. Lee, 2015) – with the e-waste that arrives on the archipelago for breakdown, repurposing and trashing. These erstwhile state-of-the-art and short-lived electronic devices are key to producing the content that CCM workers deal with day in and day out, a relationship upon which I will elaborate later in this piece.

Indeed, despite claims over the past four decades that increasing reliance on digital technologies, networked personal computing and internet-based information transmission would lead to "the paperless office" ("Businessweek," 2015/1975) – coinciding directly with the increased expansion of globalization and shifting of work tasks in the West away from manufacturing and toward analytical labor (Bell, 1973) – every "paperless office" is rife with machines and components that are destined for obsolescence. The obsolescence results in literal tons of circuit boards, mouses, CRT monitors, outmoded mobile phones and tablets, and all their accoutrements in the forms of batteries, cables and components, being dumped in the garbage cans, retail store take-back programs and recycling bins of the world. While many of those disposing of such e-waste may believe they are doing well by putting these items into recycling programs, the general consensus of experts is that not enough is being done: "…policymakers, producers and recyclers in various countries have created specialized 'take-back and treatment systems' to collect e-waste from final owners, and process it in

professional treatment facilities. Unfortunately, despite these efforts, the collection and state-of-the-art treatment of e-waste is limited, and most nations are still without such e-waste management systems" (Baldé, Wang, Kuehr, & Huisman, 2015, p. 4).

Out of sight and out of mind, yesterday's prized gadgets do not simply disappear from existence or find themselves recycled into a bit of harmless dust. Rather, they often begin a second life, one that sees the techno-trash bundled up and loaded onto container barges and "…shipped great distances to developing countries where crude and inefficient techniques are often used to extract materials and components, pos[ing] dangers to poorly protected workers and the local natural environment" (Baldé et al., 2015, p. 4). In the best of circumstances, such materials arrive to their destinations through a process that is legal and regulated, but frequently these transactions happen outside the bounds of legal frameworks. For example, and despite protestations to the contrary, it appears that Makris and Chronic, Inc., of Canadian adult diaper fame, were attempting to skirt the law with a mislabeled shipment. The bottom line is that official take-back programs touted and operated by global technology corporations are limited in scope, extending to only 4 out of 7 consumers worldwide (Baldé et al., 2015, p. 23), resulting in an alternative economy of unknown disposal mechanisms that are likely transboundary – spatial and legal – in nature.

Fig. 2 The Paperless Office, or: Informal recycling of e-waste near Manila, Philippines. Credit: SOMO, Creative Commons 4.0 license (Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivatives). Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/somoamsterdam/7982088828

Commercial Content Moderation: The Global Circuits of Digital Trash

Despite a pervasive myth that information online has always circulated without intervention, or ought to (one need only refer to Stewart Brand's oft-repeated claim that "information wants to be free" [Turner, 2006, p. 262]1 to get a feel for the ethos that undergirds the aspirational promise around the internet for the past 20 years, in particular), internet content has a long history of being controlled by intermediaries of various kinds. In the early, pre-commercial days of the mostly text-based internet, volunteers were frequently the forces undertaking the moderation in early online communities (e.g. BBSes; Usenet). Yet as the internet has grown from the province of a

technologically-connected subcultural realm to a mainstream commercial apparatus with great potential for financial gain, content is increasingly moderated in a systematic way and on a large scale by individuals or firms who receive remuneration for their services. It is this set of practices that I describe as commercial content moderation, or CCM.

Commercial content moderation involves the screening and review of user-generated content (UGC) posted to internet sites, social media and other online platforms and outlets that increasingly rely on massive quantities of UGC data to populate platforms and drive user engagement. While screening can occur either before content makes it to its destination site, or can be assessed in real time, the most common form of content moderation involves reviewing content that has already made it up and is flagged for review, often by other users, who personally object to a particular image or video, or find that it contravenes site guidelines, statutory limitations, or good taste. This can include a wide range of material, but often focuses on content that is highly sexual or pornographic, depicts the abuse of adults, the abuse of children (physical and/or sexual), the abuse and torture of animals, content coming from war zones and other areas besieged by violent conflict, and any material that is designed to be shocking, prurient or offensive by nature. This is the material that CCM workers seek out, view and adjudicate, second by second, for their entire working day, only to do so again the next. Simply put, they search for the internet's content-based and (psychologically and emotionally) toxic techno-trash, review it and remove it. And, much like the trash collectors and dismantlers of physical refuse, they are unseen and their work goes on largely without acknowledgement. After all, who misses what is not there?

CCM work can become rote, but it is far from simple. In the contemporary digital media environment, characterized by vast amounts of UGC uploads (YouTube alone receives 100 hours of uploaded video per minute ("Statistics - YouTube," n.d.) to massively popular commercial internet sites and social media platforms, making decisions about what UGC is acceptable and what is not is a complex process, beyond the capabilities of software or algorithms alone. While some content lends itself to partial batch processing or other types of machine-automation, the vast majority of it requires human intervention — particularly when it involves video content or images. When UGC is screened, either before or after it has been posted, human content moderators are called upon to employ an array of high-level cognitive functions and cultural competencies to make decisions about its appropriateness for a site or platform. They must be experts in matters of taste for the site's presumed audience, have cultural knowledge about location of origin of the platform and of the audience (both of which may be very far removed, geographically and culturally, from where the screening is taking place), have linguistic competency in the language of the UGC (that may be a learned or second language for the content moderator), be steeped in the relevant laws governing the site's location of origin and be experts in the user guidelines and other platform-level specifics concerning what is and is not allowed.

CCM is an essential practice in the media production cycle for commercial websites, social media platforms, and media properties that solicit UGC as a part of their online presence. For those who employ this practice, CCM and screening is a crucial step that protects their corporate or platform brand (typically via user adherence to site guidelines or rules), ensures compliance with relevant laws and statutes governing their operations, and maintains an audience of users willing to visit, upload and view content

on their sites. How the content moderation occurs, however, varies by platform, company, the kind of UGC solicited by the platform/site, and the level of tolerance for risk that a company or site is willing to take. A number of configurations and options are therefore available such that companies are able to tailor a CCM solution to meet their particular needs. CCM practices take place in varied worksites; content moderators may work in-house for large tech firms; they may provide services via boutique, social media-specialty firms; the CCM work may take place in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) or call center-like environments, particularly common in the Philippines; or the tasks might be broken down in small parts and undertaken by freelancers using microlabor websites such as Mechanical Turk and others.

A more recent phenomenon has followed the path of many other service-sector industries; as companies look to achieve cost savings in labor whenever possible, CCM work is now being outsourced to well-known global offshore (from the perspective of North American and European firms) labor centers such as India and the Philippines. In these locations, the companies requiring the CCM work find less expensive labor, highly developed infrastructure to accommodate the 24/7 deluge of UGC, workers with linguistic and cultural competencies that make them capable of undertaking CCM in, for example, English, and restrictions on taxes or other favorable conditions for firms wishing to set up shop there. For the Western firms in need of CCM work who choose to outsource, there is an additional bonus: just as in the textile and manufacturing sectors, creating layers of contracts between the firm where the work originates and those who actually carry it out lends a significant amount of plausible deniability when there are repercussions for this work. In other words, when a CCM worker finds him or herself

distraught over the UGC s/he views every day as a term of her/his employment, s/he is typically precluded by both geography and bureaucratic organization from taking any complaints directly to Facebook, Google, Microsoft, or any number of major tech firms his/her work ultimately benefits. In utilizing the regime of offshore contracting firms, companies that outsource their CCM put it, quite simply, out of sight and out of mind.

And while some relationships in the manufacturing sector present themselves immediately as analogues (think of Apple to Foxconn, or H&M to various contract textile manufacturers in Bangladesh), CCM work also follows the circuits and global flows of techno-trash, although at a highly accelerated rate compared to lumbering garbage barges packed with e-waste. The transfer rate of *digital* techno-trash, in the form of disturbing content, is facilitated by worldwide networks of deep-sea cables (Starosielski, 2015) and infrastructure at each end point to accommodate the massive amounts of data traversing the globe from the West to the global South (C. Lee, 2015), an inextricable relationship between the material and the immaterial upon which CCM's disposal process, and all digital platform content creation, relies.

At the turn of the millennium, sociologist Manuel Castells famously theorized the "Network Society," an information-driven economy characterized by the compression of time and space into a "space of flows" (Castells, 2000) and organization and labor practices reconstituted into flexible, reconfigurable and dynamic structures that more closely resembled interconnected nodes than they did the top-down hierarchies of the factories and plants of the Industrial Era. Such organization, enhanced by digitalized, data-driven computational power of global digital connectivity, transcended geospatial boundaries into global networking arrangements and was no longer limited to a

traditional work day, but could function across time zones and around the clock. Yet this seeming rupture with traditional hierarchies and relationships has not proven to be as radical or liberatory as portended twenty years ago. Instead, we see acceleration and flexibility of work and work sites, a phenomenon many scholars such David Harvey (2007, p. 75) decry as quintessentially neoliberal in nature. And the trajectory of the "flow" looks very similar to well-worn circuits established during periods of formal colonial domination continuing now, via mechanisms and processes that reify those circuits through economic, rather than political or military, means.

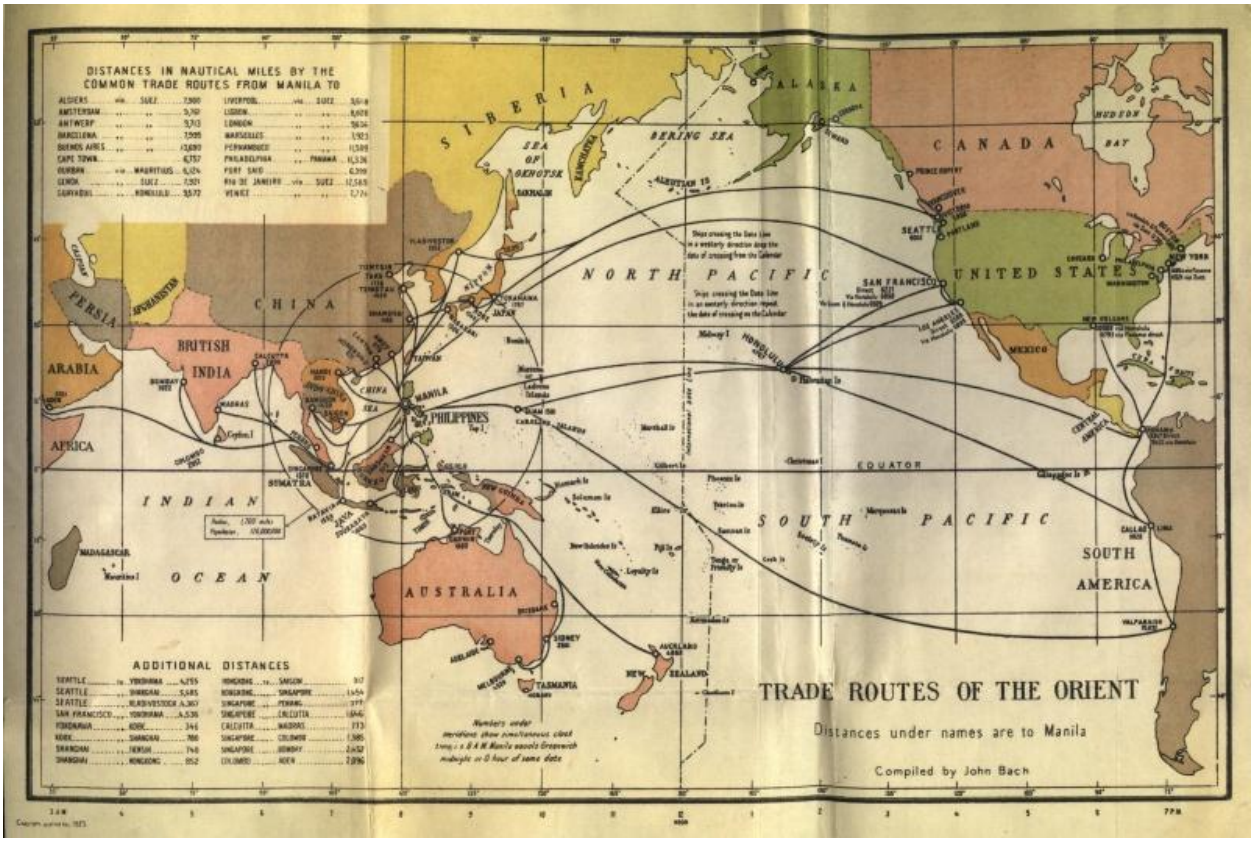

Fig. 3 "Trade Routes of the Orient," from *Beautiful Philippines: A Handbook of General Information*. 1923. Source: https://www.newberry.org/philippine-history

Commercial content moderation of UGC remains a relatively unknown and frequently not-fully-disclosed aspect of participation in social media and UGC-reliant websites and services. Many online social media and other UGC-sharing platforms consider the particulars of their CCM practices and policies to be proprietary information. In their view, full disclosure of the exact nature of their policies could lead to attempts to change the rules, or potentially give business competitors an edge by revealing practices or processes considered secret; indeed, content moderators are frequently required to sign non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) about the nature of their work in which they pledge to not reveal the particulars of their employment or job duties. This secrecy has many implications, but certainly the well-being of the workers, who contend with abhorrent material as a precondition of their continued employment, must be in question under policies that disallow them from speaking to anyone else about what they do and see, even when they do so for support.

The language of the CCM workers themselves is revealing. CCM workers whom I have interviewed have described the work that they do as akin to being immersed in "a cesspool" –feeling that they are within a pit of toxic matter and waste day in and day out (Roberts, 2014, p. 144). CCM workers have expressed to me that they do the work they do so that others do not have to see what they see. The invisibility of their tasks is rendered even greater when the jobs themselves are moved far away from the locations where the digital content was produced and for which it is ultimately intended. In this way, the digital refuse of CCM is kept away from the field of vision of those responsible for its existence, in much the same way that the garbage barges are floated around the world and made someone else's rotting, festering problem.

Conclusion: From E-waste to Digital Detritus

Ultimately, it is not enough to simply state that CCM work – all CCM work – is exploitation labor. In the Philippines, for example, a BPO job, in the best of circumstances, is a *good*, professional job that provides relatively high levels of compensation, a comfortable work environment, usually in air conditioning, in the modern private business park developments that cater to international firms (Shatkin, 2008) who fill their BPO offices with young Filipinos, and a network of other young people immersed in a similar shared workplace culture (Padios, 2012).

It is important to acknowledge the limits of metaphor I have attempted to construct: CCM workers are not in the kind of physical danger or unsafe and disturbing working conditions experienced by workers who deal with e-waste and other kinds of techno-trash, often only meters away, in other sectors of the same cities that are underdeveloped, underserviced and impoverished. Yet CCM, which calls for laborers to be immersed in a flow of *digital* detritus, has ramifications that are yet to be accounted for. The impact of looking at shocking and horrifying material without end in this job setting has not been studied. To date, there are no longitudinal or psychological evaluations that can give insight into what the ramifications of CCM work on an individual might be. This is information we must have before we can truly wave away concerns about worker well-being simply because it is unlikely to cause physical damage.

Further, we must turn the lens on the relationships that make one part of the world the dumping ground for physical waste of another by considering what kinds of work are deemed exportable and offshoreable in a similar fashion. Finally, there is a material connection, too, in the way that the kinds of machines that are necessary to undertake CCM work are the very ones that will make their way to the techno-trash dumping grounds in the Global South, alongside offshored CCM work. If we broaden the typical definition of e-waste (i.e., the material castoffs of unwanted, out of date computing machinery and all it entails) to include other types of techno-trash, such as CCM's digital waste, we can draw connections between the material and immaterial, physical and psychological dangers, and practices and processes that profit from the same historical, economic and political arrangements. Such connections will allow for a more accurate picture of the contemporary, digitally-enhanced labor environment and the trash – techno and otherwise – it produces.

Fig. 4 The Philippines is "not Canada's dumpsite." Credit/Source: @BANToxics twitter feed.

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Bio: Sarah T. Roberts is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies (FIMS), at the University of Western Ontario. Her academic and research interests are focused on digital labour and "knowledge work," and the reconfigurations of labor and production in a Post-Industrial, globalized context. Find out more at www.illusionofvolition.com

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