

# MOMENTUM KONGRESS 2024: ALTERNATIVEN

**Working title: The Upside Down of Social Media: Understanding the Invisible Digital Work of Content Moderators**

**Track #2: Offener, inklusiver und demokratischer Organisieren**

Trackmoderation: [Laura Dobusch](#)

*Sara Maric*

*Johannes Kepler University Linz/Austria, [sara.maric@jku.at](mailto:sara.maric@jku.at)*

*Elke Schüßler*

*Leuphana University Lüneburg/Germany, [elke.schuessler@leuphana.de](mailto:elke.schuessler@leuphana.de)*

## **ABSTRACT**

Digital platforms are ubiquitous, organizing a variety of areas - from listening to music, ordering food, and online dating, to the ability to let someone develop an app for you by purchasing professional services from highly skilled freelancers (Stark & Pais, 2020). They enable the exchange of goods, services, and knowledge between geographically dispersed sellers and consumers (Gawer, 2014). Due to their malleable technological infrastructure, digital platforms emerge in various fields enabling a wide range of diverse cases (Mair & Reischauer, 2017; Schüßler et al., 2021). Under the banner of the "Sharing Economy," platforms are discussed as opportunities for de-commodification and emancipation from established economic structures, facilitating community-based exchanges outside market logic (Dobusch, 2019; Maurer et al., 2020). While digital platforms tend to vary in form, sector, and business model (e.g. Browne et al., 2018), they commonly blur established boundaries between production and consumption, as well as between regular employment and gig work, bypassing traditional employment relationships, lowering labour standards (e.g. Fleming, 2017), deepening social inequality (e.g. Schor, 2017), and commodifying previously uncommodified goods and services. Although digital platform organizations promote themselves as facilitators

of diverse opportunities, they are less willing to acknowledge the invisible labour essential for sustaining the platform (Justesen & Plesner, 2024).

Among the top 5 most popular platforms in terms of active users, Facebook leads with 3,065 million users, closely followed by YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok (Statista, 2024). Three of these platforms (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) are owned by Meta Platforms, Inc.. In their outward appearance, social media platforms promote the image of intermediaries, facilitating the connection and communication of globally dispersed actors. This narrative is prominently displayed on the homepages of digital platforms. For example, on Meta's homepage, the mission statement goes as follows, "Giving people the power to build community and bring the world closer together." TikTok, who is owned by ByteDance Ltd. and reached around \$4.11 billion in revenues by the end of 2023, claims, "Our mission is to inspire creativity and bring joy."

As users, we mostly see content from our friends and acquaintances, as well as advertisements and content selected by the algorithm based on our preferences and user behaviour. Disturbing, graphic, and violent content are strictly prohibited according to the guidelines and policies of the platform organization. However, these rules are not primarily responsible for ensuring that harmful content does not appear on our For You Page or feed. The removal of such content is done by individuals, so-called content moderators, who sift through and filter content for social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Due to the poor working conditions of content moderation, platform organizations, and generative AI companies have a keen interest in keeping this type of work hidden from the public (Perrigo, 2023).

Content moderators are difficult to access and are restricted from discussing their work due to Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs). Platform companies like Meta, ByteDance, or OpenAI do not directly employ them. This type of work is outsourced to companies that offer content moderation as a service, often having one platform or AI company as their main client. Given that this profession offers an easy entry into the labour market for individuals with migration backgrounds, the potential loss of employment weighs even more heavily. Content moderators are permitted to moderate content in either their native language or English, thereby mitigating the linguistic barriers often encountered in local job markets.

Between October 2023 and April 2024, we conducted 41 semi-structured interviews with content moderators from Germany and Kenya. Initial findings from our interview data suggest that content moderators filter content based on guidelines provided by social media platform organizations or AI companies handed down to the content moderation company. These rules and guidelines are structured within hierarchy trees, facilitating prioritization when content violates guidelines in multiple ways. However, these guidelines are not fixed and evolve continuously, with changes initiated and determined by the respective companies. Content moderators receive profiles or posts to review in the form of so-called tickets. Within a few seconds, they must decide whether the content is approved for release, removed from the platform, or blocked. Furthermore, their overall work performance is tracked, measured, and in case of underperformance subject to discussion with their supervisor. Performance measurement parameters include accuracy rates (the number of tickets filtered correctly), average handling time (time required per ticket), and productivity time (actual duration spent moderating content, and team meetings are excluded). In their work, content moderators not only collaborate with AI or compensate for its shortcomings, but also simultaneously train AI, so that the technology becomes better at filtering content in the future.

Due to the physical dispersion and anonymity of content moderators, this type of digital work remains invisible contributing to a lack of awareness and recognition of their contributions to digital platforms (Justesen & Plesner, 2024). In our full paper we aim at providing deeper insights into the following questions:

- How is content moderation organized? What are the connections to the platform organizations?
- What are the associated costs of content moderation, and who covers them?
- What can we do to ensure that the working conditions of content moderators become fair? And how can this type of invisible digital labour become more sustainable?

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