

(Niche) Platforms as Experimental Spaces for Content Moderation - Mapping small, medium and niche platforms online

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Introduction¹

So far, there has been a lack of debate in platform governance about platforms beyond #BigTech, i.e. Google, Facebook and Co. However, surveying content moderation on smaller platforms provides an insight into experimental fields of an area that is rarely accessible on large platforms. So far, research has had to rely on individual whistleblower reports and journalistic-investigative reporting. What exactly happens in content moderation and how it also changes often remains in a black box.

Smaller platforms offer researchers the opportunity to survey this area and thus gain more transparent insights into different forms of content moderation - and without being forced to do so by legislation. A survey of their practical, innovation-driven approaches to content moderation allows us to show how the balancing act between deleting unwanted content and preserving freedom of expression can be achieved without regulatory mandates.

How can small and medium-sized platforms (SMP) be described?

A systematic and comparative survey of small and medium-sized platforms and niche platforms that are not dominant market players such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube does not yet exist. However, in order to capture the multi-layered content moderation and the challenge of election-related content, it is precisely these platforms that are interesting. They often have approaches in this area that are unconventional and community-based. These platforms, which are part of a larger landscape, are now categorised here for the first time in a taxonomy in order to define descriptive terms and to map the differently situated conditions that make up a smaller and medium-sized platform and/or niche platform.

Definition of small and medium-sized platforms (SMP)

Size of the platform according to the number of users

SMPs are those which, due to their size, do not fall under the German NetzDG and the Digital Services Act (DSA). The NetzDG only regulates platforms that have more than 2 million registered users in Germany. The regulations of the DSA apply in principle to all platforms. Small and micro enterprises are exempt. The classification as such a company is based on a recommendation of the EU Commission and includes

¹ More about the project "Niche Platforms" can be found in the podcast episode of the BredowCast with Christina Dinar, in which further details and background of the project are explained. More on social networks in election campaigns can also be found in the podcast of the Weizenbaum Forum. Christina Dinar talks about inclusive digital spaces in an interview in Americas Dialogues.

criteria such as turnover or the number of employees. Stricter rules, including on content moderation, apply to platforms with more than 45 million users. These are called Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs).

Thematic design of the platform

Another legal distinction of the "major platforms" from SMP is the indirect third-party effect of fundamental rights. Some civil courts decide on the basis of the thematic "cut" of the platform. If there is a clear thematic focus (e.g. "Forum for Dachshund Friends"), platforms may remove posts that do not fit the focus at their own discretion ("In the Forum for Dachshund Friends, please only postings on dog-related topics, everything else will be deleted!") However, if the platform serves the "general exchange of information and opinions of users without thematic limitation", the decision on deletion cannot be entirely "at the discretion of the platform operator". The virtual domiciliary right cannot then simply be executed by the platform. SMP can also be described as so-called niche platforms, this describes the thematic limitation to a "niche topic" (such as "Dackelfreunde Forum"). The two terms SMP platforms and niche platforms can overlap, also in the platform's self-description, but they are two different categories.

Definition of niche platform = "extension of a platform space".

More than just along with user numbers, niche platform describes a place for interest-based exchange; a small protected area where one can stay and develop unhindered by competition. Very often, the niche is seen as a place with development potential, because target group-specific, precise marketing is possible. In ethnographic subculture research, the niche culture is a sideshow for subversive practice or even social corrective. The internet itself was also a subcultural niche for a long time with a hacker/nerd culture developing in the 90s. The structural-technical decentralisation of the internet still enables niche subculture formation today and is thus also a particularly important means of exchange and networking for marginalised groups.

Platform definition

In the context of this survey, platforms are "social media platforms" with user-generated content, so-called "UG content-hosting and interaction platforms". This refers to content that has been created by the user him/herself and with which the user can interact. The dimensions of social interaction and self-created content are particularly important here, similar to the terms social media or social networks.

User number as a value of regulation of the "internet-by-size" and as a classification category for SMP platforms

The Monthly Active User (MAU) unit as an organising element in the platform landscape

The number of users on a platform has become a value of regulation itself. This kind of "regulating internet by size" is to be critically evaluated under various aspects. Laws such as the NetzDG as well as draft laws such as the DSA and various discussions on reforming the US law Section 230 all work with limits on user units (e.g. NetzDG: 2 million domestically registered users).

These units are created differently depending on the nation and are handled very differently in the practice of the platforms themselves, especially since this number is hardly to be grasped completely. Frequently, reference is made to Monthly Active User (MAU), yet there are uncertainties in the way this value is

defined. For example, no distinction is made between a single, identified human visitor to a website ("unique visitor") or whether the website is accessed many times by the same user account. Large platforms such as Twitter and Facebook also show differences in their information about their MAUs. Thus, the specification of exact user figures remains with the self-interpretation of the platforms and their own definition of MAU.

This gives certain platforms leeway to include themselves among the regulated large platforms or not. At the same time, the market is manifesting itself and there is a dichotomy: very market-dominant platforms with large user numbers (albeit in unclear data) receive high compliance requirements; and smaller and medium-sized platforms that do not have these requirements. The latter weigh up their own growth in user numbers very carefully - also in order to avoid the cost-intensive compliance requirements for the time being.

The MAU/user number is important as a classification and differentiation category for the taxonomy of small and medium-sized platforms. This reorders the entire platform field in Germany and introduces this practical distinction. This possibly creates and manifests a structural power imbalance and consequently a changed economic and social dynamic of platform offerings in Germany.

Unit of page views as a display and generation of publicity

Another unit is the "monthly sites visits", sometimes also called "page impressions". These mainly indicate the audience that the content of the platforms can reach. The SMP may have a small number of registered users, but still provide content that has a high number of views and interactions. This indicates a transfer of a content to a broader general public, thus leaving a niche and no longer serving a niche audience (e.g. "Dachshund Friends Forum"). It is also possible that in such cases the jurisdiction of the thematic nature of the platform itself no longer applies (e.g. "The dachshund forum has contributed a critical-satirical article on dog tax to the daily political debate"). In such cases, a so-called "cross-platforming" of the content can usually be assumed (e.g. on a large platform such as Twitter, this content of the Dachshund Forum was linked and discussed).

Even a high search engine indexing on a specific issue can develop general public and information relevance in a current context (e.g. in the context of the current flood disaster in western Germany: information in a geological expert forum on severe soil erosion associated with sudden heavy rain) and can suddenly bring high page impressions.

This category indicates that even KUMPs can develop relevance and publicity - albeit usually only selectively - and also potential growth without necessarily having many MAUs.

In the taxonomy created for KUMP (see appendix), the two units are listed separately, as they want to describe different forms and relevance of KUM platforms in a differentiated way. It remains difficult to obtain user figures, such as Monthly Active User (MAU) figures for the SMPs, and to find verified sources and consistent self-reports on them.

Recommendation on regulation with User numbers

- The User/MAU figure itself, if it is an integral part of regulation, should be regularly reviewed and revised (if necessary by a non-governmental expert opinion), also to allow for exclusions, economic development and growth potentials.

- Cross-platforming, especially in the case of problematic content (e.g. illegal content, election-related content, etc.) should increasingly bring platforms into exchange with each other. SMPs should come into low-threshold contact with larger platforms, not only through "crisis situations". The exchange can be accompanied and coordinated by an independent body that develops and issues recommendations from the exchange.
- Regular evaluations of the extent to which the law inhibits economic potential and can sustainably secure public and media diversity in platforms are recommended.

Overview of small and medium-sized platforms (KUMP)

The aim of the survey was to record the small and medium-sized platforms' (SMP) practices and policies on UGC, moderation, community management, federal election-related content, their cooperation with law enforcement agencies and a general risk assessment.

The selection criteria for the platforms surveyed were:

- used and represented in the German-speaking region (DACH region);
- small and medium-sized social media platforms (SMP) or niche platforms (NP);
- are "social platforms", i.e. have UGC and interaction possibilities with user-generated content;
- all are (socially) entrepreneurial, not non-profit.

Results of the investigation

Often, the focus of the working methods of small and medium-sized platforms is on a close interlocking of people-oriented content with the community that creates the content. In some cases, active engagement with their own communities is encouraged, which often helps to enforce in-house rules on platform use or refers to them in disputes. However, the moderation systems of the platforms studied, some of which are very different, assign an important, albeit different, role to community participation.

- **The German NetzDG seems to influence the development of guidelines and policies in companies - even though this law does not affect them at all.** The law seems to have an indirect effect in that at least consideration is given to adapting it if the prescribed measures seem sensible and useful to the platforms. These are in the area of improving reporting channels, but by no means in the transfer of users' data. Restoration of deleted content in the case of objections by users was also seen as very critical.
- **Manual moderation (i.e. moderation that takes the time to look into the context of the posters) supports the content moderation team's decided examination of the posting and its environment and nuances it.** An example: so-called "agenda setting in the election campaign" is quickly prevented, since behind it there are usually accounts that are only founded for a special purpose and whose goal is to denigrate political opponents. This also ties in with an increase in negative campaigning that has been measured among conservative groups in online election campaigns. Manual moderation also helps to stop agenda-setting in the area of digital violence, such as LoveScams and cyber-grooming, but also to stop offers or business interests that are prohibited on platforms.
- **Dealing with election-related content is always subject to the platforms' own rules. The platform rules range from allowing explicitly political groups to profile pictures with party references and**

tolerating the activity of candidates for the Bundestag or deliberately restricting the topic. Some platforms also consciously and actively support the call for democratic elections.

- Community participation (e.g. as verified "trusted flaggers" or in the peer review process during the approval of uploaded images) **seems to lead to increased identification of users with the platform and its rules.** The platforms differ in the variety and method of active or passive moderation and the points at which the community is involved.
- **From an organisational sociological point of view, an initial structural neglect of the development of content moderation can be observed in the companies.** Relatively independent of when the company entered the start-up phase with the platform, the area of content and complaint management within the organisational structure was often given few priorities and resources for development at the beginning and has only received expansion, standardisation and development in recent years.

Furthermore, the platforms were generally open to science and research and were willing to cooperate and provide data for such surveys. Only a few platforms have been studied so far, but there is the prospect of being able to enrich this void with a more evidence-based survey to support a diverse, differentiated and informed debate on this in the field of regulation and future rule-making, and to be able to make nuanced regulatory proposals.

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