Ruben Cordova vs. Facebook Censorship

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Ruben Cordova is a curator and art historian who has been gathering research materials on Facebook for almost ten years. His digital objects consist of photographs, links, and commentaries which he hoped to use for publication. In November 2018, however, Cordova ran into an unexpected conflict with Facebook's censors. The curator had posted photographs of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition titled *Like Life: Sculpture, Color, and the Body*. At least one of the shared photographs displayed an extremely realistic sculpture of a nude woman and, despite Cordova's attempt to contextualize the image by providing a link to the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition site, Facebook algorithms and human censors deemed the image as sexually explicit and subsequently locked Cordova out of his account, effectively blocking him from his own collection that had taken years to procure.

Apparently Cordova did not have any sort of backup for his research materials and all he wanted at the time of the incident was to salvage his years of work (Small, 2018), but he admitted to *Hyperallergic* that he did not have much grounds for argument considering the extreme realism of the sculpture in question. Considering that Cordova at least kind of understood Facebook's decision to censor his photograph, I'm a bit confused as to why he chose the social platform as his sole data repository in the first place. He claimed that Facebook made it easier to communicate with colleagues who were difficult to reach by email or phone, but he used the site under the assumption that his data would be permanently accessible. A workshop held in 2006 titled 'Digital Curation and Trusted Repositories: Seeking Success' addressed the dangers of assuming that any software or hardware will be permanent (Lee & Tibbo, 2007), and I believe that it's especially dangerous to place a high level of trust in a social network where content is publicly viewable and therefore subject to the discretion of the site's users and administrators.

Facebook began as a website for college students to socialize and was not initially designed to be a place for art criticism, so it should not be viewed as an upholder of freedom of speech. Facebook administrators have the right to remove content believed to be unfit for their website, and the site has already been at censorship-related odds with at least two famous works of art: Carey Dunne's article from 2016 details the censorship of a photo of Copenhagen's famous *The Little Mermaid* statue, and in 2018, three months before Cordova's case, Facebook was again in the news for censoring a photo of Pablo Picasso's *Women at Their Toilette* (Small). Such instances should alert Facebook users to censorship policies and thus cause them to be wary about what they choose to share on their public accounts. However, some writers of *Hyperallergic* do not see it this way: Jillian Steinhauer (2013) suggests that 'maybe the people employed as censors at Facebook should be required to take art history classes.' It's unclear whether Steinhauer's comment is a joke, but either

way, such an expectation should not be applied to a social media platform whose main goal is to connect people--not to be an authority on art history and criticism.

Zachary Small (2018) makes a stronger argument against Facebook regarding Cordova's scenario, noting that Facebook's censorship policies are unclear and at times self-contradictory: 'Unlike Facebook's advertisement guidelines, which explicitly greenlight nude sculpture, the website's community standards make no distinction between art and obscene images.' Admittedly, even the first paragraph of Facebook's Community Standards is not exactly clear: 'Every day, people use Facebook to share their experiences, connect with friends and family, and build communities. We are a service for more than two billion people to freely express themselves across countries and cultures and in dozens of languages' (Facebook Community Standards, n.d.). One thing from Facebook's statement is clear: the site's first priority is connecting friends and family; allowing people to 'freely express themselves' is both vague and secondary. The rest of the Community Standards are boring and unlikely to be read by most users, and with obscure statements such as 'The goal of our Community Standards is to create a place for expression and give people a voice,' it's not surprising that the terms could be ignored or misinterpreted.

Cordova's dilemma raises important questions about how researchers choose where to deposit their data. Christopher Lee and Helen Tibbo delve into such questions in an article from 2007, perhaps when online repositories were even less trusted than they are now: 'What does trust really mean in the context of a contributor-based repository, and will individuals or organizations contribute to a repository just because they trust that it will preserve digital assets over time?' (Lee & Tibbo, 2007). The writers also assert that a lot of institutions have very little experience in digital curation and so have not yet come up with solid standards and protocols for making it work. These theories can easily be applied to Facebook, which has not historically been considered a repository for research data and therefore does not have adequate policies and procedures set up to deal with scenarios such as Ruben Cordova's.

Cordova may argue that using Facebook as a repository adds value to the data because his friends and colleagues, who share his interests, are more likely to interact with the data when it is readily presented to them in one place. Some methods of adding value to data include personalization, social tagging, data visualization, and user feedback (Qin, Ball, and Greenberg, 2012), all of which can be done on Facebook. Apparently the curator did not do enough, however, and perhaps he could have avoided losing access to his work by adding more context to his photos, or by not actually posting the photos at all and instead providing links to art-related websites, such as that of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gillian Oliver, Harvey Ross (2016), and Sarah Higgins (2012) have all discussed the importance of context, which is crucial for understanding data and can easily be lost any time data is removed from its original environment. Poor

context, i.e. Facebook censors not being able to determine that photos of a nude woman were actually sculptures, is what caused a renowned curator to lose his data.

Overall, Ruben Cordova may have benefited from using more descriptive metadata to create context for his photos, or he could have used a digital repository in which the use and censorship policies are clearer or more geared toward his purpose. The censorship issue with Facebook is a prime example of a statement by Paul Edwards (2011): ‘Research scientists’ main interest, after all, is in using data, not in describing them for the benefit of invisible, unknown future users, to whom they are not accountable and from whom they receive little if any benefit.’ Cordova was thinking of his data in terms of himself and his colleagues and was not considering the other types of people who regularly use Facebook. Researchers in general should be aware of the policies on their chosen data repositories, and may want to store their curated materials in more than one location. Conversely, websites like Facebook should ensure that their policies and procedures regarding censorship and access are clear, and that a fair process is in place for handling more complex scenarios such as Cordova’s. Most professionals seem to agree that preserving research data is important and that steps should be taken to ensure proper digital curation.

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