Online Harassment and Content Moderation: The Case of Blocklists

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Online Harassment

- Growing social problem
- 41% of Americans have suffered online harassment
- Social media most common venue of online harassment

"We suck at dealing with abuse and trolls on the platform and we've sucked at it for years."

- Twitter CEO

Follow

Tweet to @shagunjhaver

Add or remove from lists…

Mute @shagunjhaver

Block @shagunjhaver

Report @shagunjhaver

Embed this Profile

Attack by multiple individuals

Individual blocking becomes tedious

Twitter Blocklists

• Third party Twitter application

• Allow people to share who they block on Twitter

• Distribute the load of blocking

• Block a large number of users quickly

Why study Twitter blocklists?

- It addresses what is missing in content moderation

- Understand gap between needs of users and affordances of moderation

- Vehicle to understand the issue of online harassment

Block All and Subscribe	Learn more about Block Together	Search by screen name	Download CSV	

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | ... | » |

Screen Name	Name	Account Created	Tweets	Following	Followers
banallballs	Banal Balls	3 years ago	64	0	1
steeph_k_ebooks	steeph_k_ebooks	3 years ago	11099	783	690
FeministSpanker	Hassat Layton	3 years ago	237	17	3
Coride_co	Coride.co	4 years ago	27383	770	681
sperbs_ebooks	Lauren Sperber	3 years ago	12199	1667	1348
EmpereurTae	EmpereurTae💜	3 years ago	8123	832	1426
petechesbot	Pete Chesbot	4 years ago	2098	259	231
patriot_ebooks	True Patriot	3 years ago	5599	11	47
ItsFunnyBob	Dancing Spongebob	5 years ago	83334	4764	6350

Research Questions

What behavior patterns do blocklist subscribers identify as instances of online harassment?

How do users' Twitter experiences change after subscribing?

What are the advantages and challenges of using blocklists?

How do blocked users perceive the use of anti-abuse blocklists?

Methods

- Purposive Sampling
- Two Groups:
  - Blocklist subscribers
  - Users blocked on blocklists
- 14 interviews for each group
- Inductive analysis

Findings

Online Harassment

> **They weren't just gross. They were violent. I couldn't shake them. I had to take a break and they kept intrusively coming into my thoughts. It was really awful.**

- SB-11

Tactics used by Harassers

Brigading	Concern Trolling	Dogwhistling
Dogpilling	Doxing	Identity Deception
Multiple SNSs	Sealioning	Sockpuppeting
Subtle threats	Swarming	Swatting

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Why do users subscribe to blocklists?

" **I eventually just grew tired of trying to either respond to these people and yeah, eventually, I just didn't want to talk to these people anymore, because it was a repeating pattern...They say the same offensive remarks, same insults, same aggressive behavior.**

- SB-14

Perspectives of Blocked Users

Perception that Blocklists are Unfair
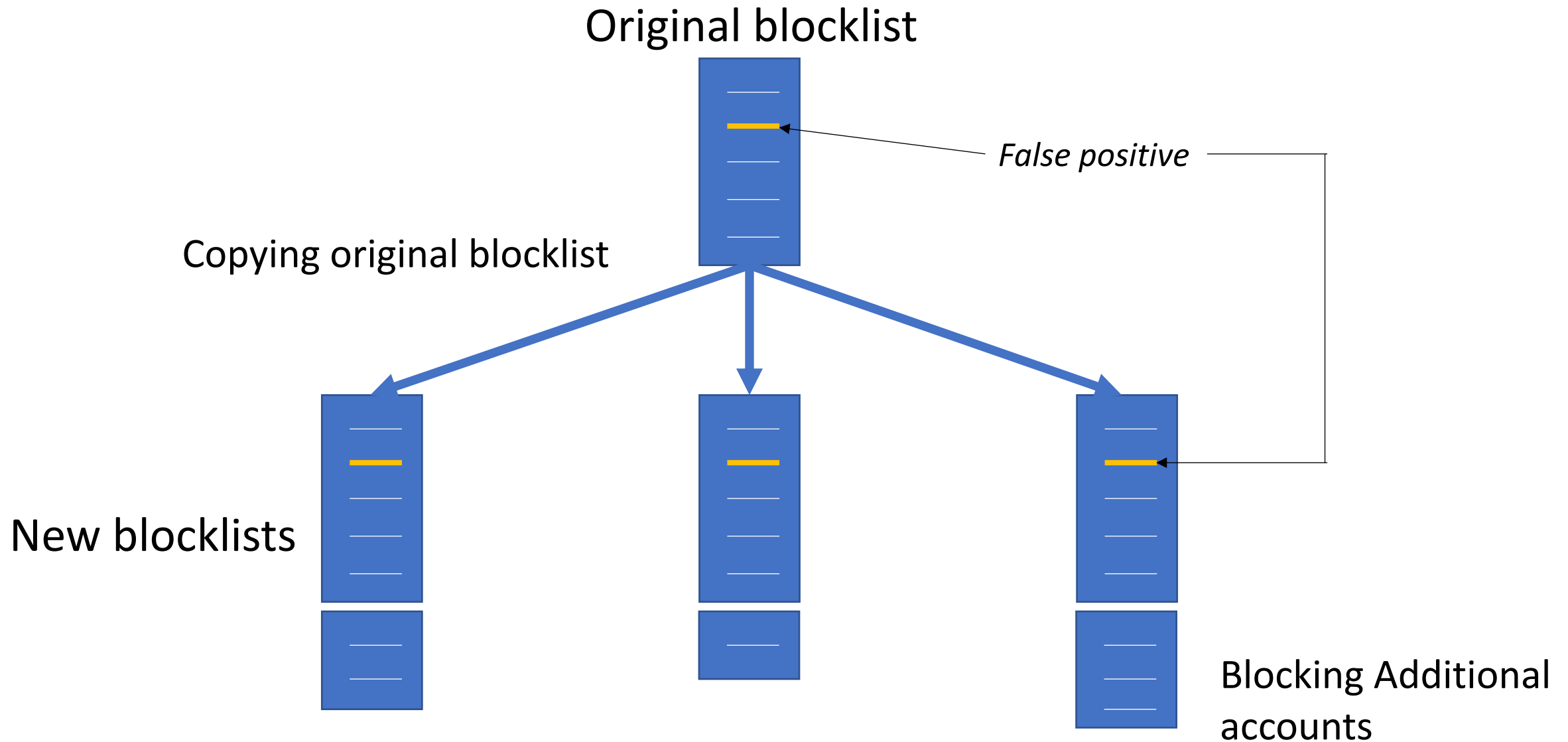
Blocks too much

Blocks unfairly

Biases in curation
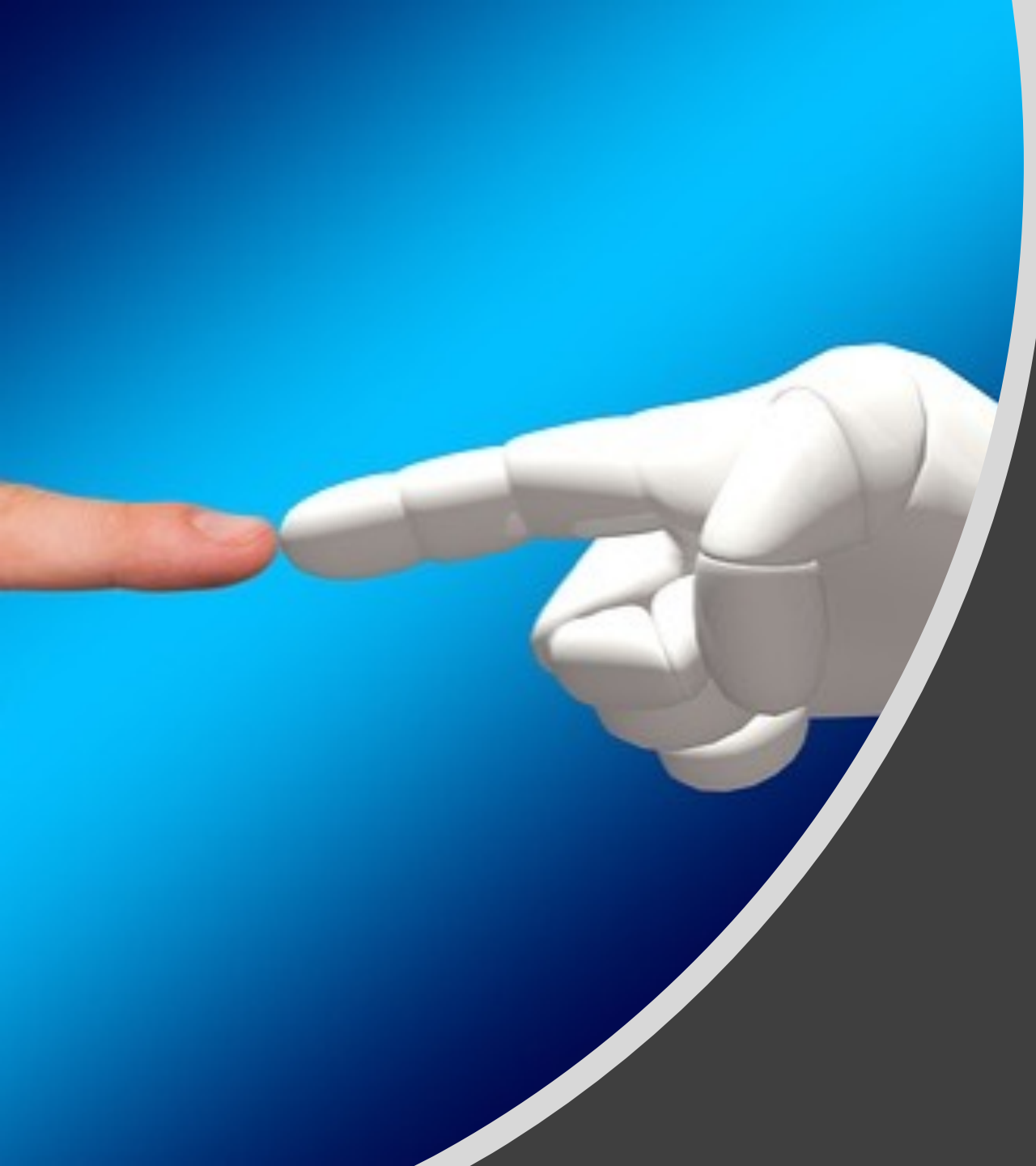
Perception that Blocklists are Unfair

" **At a certain point, the International Game Developers Association sponsored a blocklist I was on, claiming it was a way to block the worst harassers of Twitter. Besides not being a harasser, I am a game designer so an association that is supposed to protect me was accusing me instead.**

Blocking Contagion

Original blocklist

Copying original blocklist

False positive

New blocklists

Blocking Additional accounts

Implications

Improving blocking mechanisms

Human-machine hybrid blocklists

- Programs categorize offensive users
- ➢ Block blatantly offensive users
- ➢ Humans review possibly offensive users

Improving blocking mechanisms

Making blocklists more transparent

- Record reasons for blocking

Improving blocking mechanisms

Avoiding blocking contagion

- Discourage copying of blocked accounts

Understanding Mechanisms

Questions?

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