



# In the Colony of Blooded Eyes

A Trilogy on Working Conditions in  
Germany as a Content Moderator

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**Sing of human unsuccess  
In a rapture of distress;**

**In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.**

From *Another Time* by W. H. Auden, published by Random House.

## **PREFACE**

In May 2019 after a long-term study and research in Philosophy in Iran, the Czech Republic, and Germany, I decided to take a break from academic life. Therefore, I moved to Berlin and began with a Content Moderation<sup>1</sup> job as a temporary occupation to redirect myself. This was my entry point to deeply understanding the culture of silence and the culture of anonymity with both my body and mind. This story is the most common experience of migrant workers: the story of living in a dystopian setting as their reality. In the absence of citizenship, there is no time to find a job to *work*<sup>2</sup>. Then, I had to jump into an exploitative position to do the clockwork labor of cleaning. But now is the time to take action, to disclose for the preservation of my *freedom*...

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<sup>1</sup>Content moderation is the process of reviewing and monitoring user-generated content on online platforms to ensure it meets certain standards and guidelines. This includes removing inappropriate or offensive content and enforcing community guidelines and terms of service. To learn more about content moderation work in Germany, see: Ahmad, S., Greb, M. (2022). "Automating social media content moderation: implications for governance and labour discretion". *Work in the Global Economy*, 2(2), 176-198. Retrieved Jun 21, 2024, from <https://doi.org/10.1332/273241721X16647876031174>

<sup>2</sup>In *The Human Condition*, published in 1958, Arendt criticizes the conception of the modern age through the tripartite division of the *vita activa* in labor, work and action: "Labor is the activity which is tied to the human condition of life, work the activity which is tied to the condition of worldliness, and action the activity tied to the condition of plurality. ... Labor is judged by its ability to sustain human life, to cater to our biological needs of consumption and reproduction, work is judged by its ability to build and maintain a world fit for human use, and action is judged by its ability to disclose the identity of the agent, to affirm the reality of the world, and to actualize our capacity for freedom." See: Tömmel, Tatjana and Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves, "Hannah Arendt", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/arendt/>>.

# INTRODUCTION

Do you know how our minds, as human beings, are affected by reviewing pictures and videos of suicide, animal abuse, child abuse, hateful content, pornography, bullying, domestic violence, and other types of harsh, violent content, 7 hours a day, five days a week, as an occupation?

What if all this content is live videos? How does it affect your mind? How does it affect your mind if you are supposed to EVALUATE all this content, in a predetermined time, max 1 minute?

How does it affect your mind if you are supposed to evaluate it accurately, which requires watching and listening to it intently (because your EVALUATION MUST be accurate)?

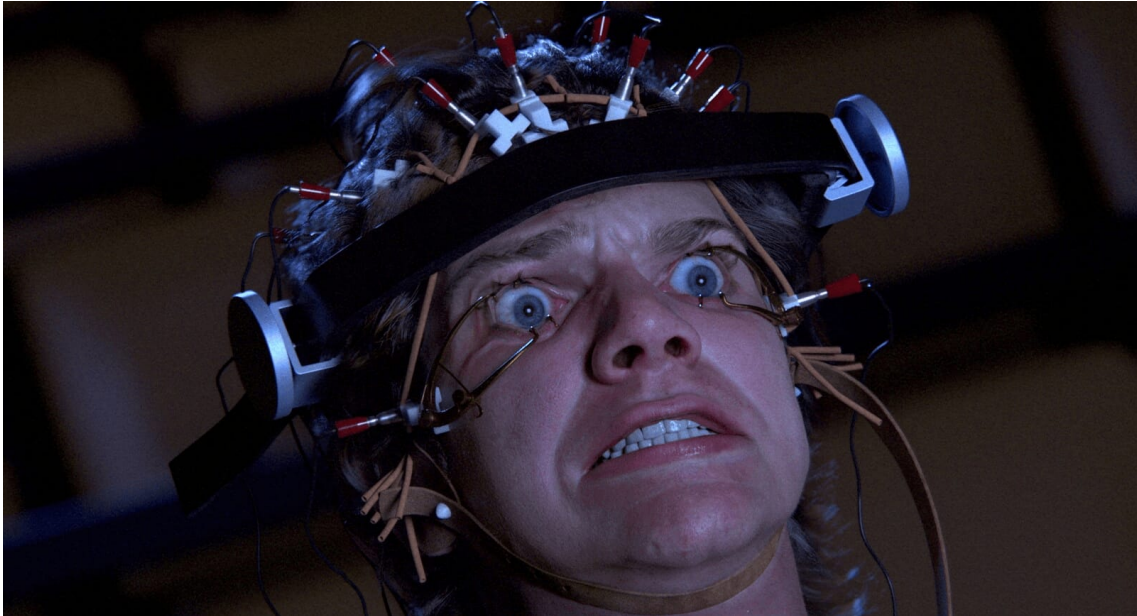
What if you are not allowed to share this daily experience with anyone? How does it affect your mind? How does it affect your mind when the evaluation criteria of policymakers in corporations and such entities contradict your own values?

How does it feel? Reviewing them? Evaluating them... Not being allowed to share your experience of facing those contents or relieve the imposed stress and emotions... How does it feel?

How does having all these feelings affect your mind? How do you feel about yourself if this is your daily occupation?

How does it feel when you review all this content next to your colleagues in a mixed-gender workspace? How does it affect your mental health if you already have had potentially minimal mood disorders? Who knows? Who can even bring up these questions for a required field of research?

## FIRST: CLEARING UNDER SURVEILLANCE; CLOCK-WORK CLEANERS



As a daily routine content moderator's task, I was supposed to EVALUATE a wide range of contents (videos, pictures, texts, soundtracks) randomly (violent and nonviolent) one after the other: a nostalgic animation reminding of my childhood, a live feed of sex workers soliciting sex, self harm imagery, picture of a cute dog, hatred content against refugees from Afghanistan living in Iran, a long critical feminist text about transphobia, video of a happy couple cycling all around the world in a beautiful landscape, a viral video of police brutality in Iran's uprising... one after the other, delete hate speech, ignore, ignore, escalation terrorism threat, ignore, laugh, lump in my throat, need a break to breath but I have had already all breaks available, stuck in my chair, produce, take action, produce the hours, produce the hours... the constant surveillance of the team leaders, the feeling of the lump in my throat, the heaviness of the surveillance.

The evaluation has specific conditions, namely, **timeliness** and **accuracy**: the handling time by moderators determined as average is normally less than 1 min,ute and the accuracy of evaluation/decision

is defined by the policy established by the platform owner! The elements of handling time and accuracy play a key role in the extension of work contracts. Moderators usually receive a permanent contract after two years but their jobs are still not secured.

In four years of my employment, the company I worked for was re-branded three times. Most of the employees in Berlin, Germany, are migrants. Working a 24/7 job, which minimizes their chance for socializing, and being paid minimum wage while having to meet specific qualifications of lingual, political and cultural knowledge.

Long story short, the most familiar image of my experience as a content moderator is a dystopian set drawn in A Clockwork Orange as a psychological test named the Ludovico Technique. In this dystopian satirical black comedy, in the set of a near-future society, this specific psychological test is a form of aversion therapy in which the main character, Alex, is injected with nausea-inducing drugs while watching graphically violent films, eventually conditioning him to become severely ill at the mere thought of violence. Content Moderators, as human intelligence in such occupations, are supposed to train artificial intelligence about human ways but end up becoming sick of life, human beings, and their ways!

## **SECOND: DISCLOSURE AS PRESERVATION OF HUMAN FREEDOM**

In the last decade, the outsourcing service provider companies in Germany employed thousands of migrants as “content moderators” to do the labor of “cleaning” social media for giant corporations as platform owners in the USA or China.

Migrants and refugees who are neither recognised as European citizens in the sense of accessibility to the job market nor have any direct impact on politicians’ vote pocket are the easiest target for the exploitative work conditions of content moderation: marginalized and deprived of integration opportunity (the languages they use at work are English and their mother tongue, plus 24/7 flexibility of



shift plan), their qualifications disregarded (the proficiency of language knowledge, social and political knowledge), and working in the absence of proper safety conditions.

Minimum-wage jobs cleaning the virtual space are the new form of underestimated cleaning labor that is assigned to migrants or asylum seekers in Europe. Meanwhile, other occupations that require the same language proficiency, like translators, language mediators or interpreters, and other jobs related to maintaining the safety and health of society like police, firefighter, or social workers, pay more, not even for the proficiency and the qualification but also for doing a hazardous job which also requires early retirement.

But what is preventing any change in the exploitative conditions in content moderation?

The neoliberal politics of Germany in the encounter with giant corporations, hand in hand with the strict data protection rules, made the job market in Germany a safe backyard for the outsourcing service provider companies to exploit.

The vast range of non-disclosure agreements that these employers present as a main part of the work contract indeed not only threat-

ens the freedom of the workers but also is the grassroots of the exploitative work condition.

According to Arendt in *Human Condition*, what preserves human freedom is “action”, differentiated from “labor” and “work.” Action is motivated by the desire for recognition and the pursuit of common goals. Action involves meaningful interactions with others, such as dialogue, debate, and political engagement, and it plays a central role in shaping the public sphere. Arendt argues that action is essential for the preservation of human freedom and the cultivation of individuality within society. Through action, individuals assert their unique perspectives and contribute to the ongoing process of collective decision-making and self-governance. Therefore, action is the means by which humans disclose themselves to others, the way to freedom.

Hence, I call the boundaryless agreement of NON-DISCLOSURE not only a violation of human freedom but also a threat to action as preservation of humanity! Disclosure makes us equal!

The neoliberal politics of the economy, hand in hand with the conservative judicial system in cooperation with the conservative trade unions paired with xenophobic behavior, act as the executive apparatus<sup>3</sup> of action, freedom, and humanity.

This dystopian Kafkaesque set, which we are living as our reality, is recreating the scene that Kafka drew in the short story *In the Penal Colony*. The dystopian Kafkaesque set of introducing an execution apparatus to a traveler in *In the Penal Colony* is now our act of disclosure in the *Data Workers’ Inquiry* project. What we do in the *Data Workers’ Inquiry*<sup>4</sup> is the process of disclosure as the freedom action

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<sup>3</sup>In the *Penal Colony* is a Kafkaesque tale set on a remote island. A mysterious apparatus, designed by the former Commandant, is used to execute prisoners in a horrifically slow and drawn-out manner. A traveler, visiting the colony, is shown the machine and its gruesome process by a devout officer. As the story unfolds, the absurdity and cruelty of the punishment become increasingly apparent, culminating in a shocking and symbolic ending.

<sup>4</sup>“The *Data Workers’ Inquiry* is a community-based research project in which data workers join us as community researchers to lead their own inquiry in their respective workplaces. The community researchers guide the direction of the research, such that it is oriented towards their needs and goals of building workplace power but supported by formally trained qualitative researchers. We adapt Marx’s 1880 *Workers’ Inquiry* to the phenomenon of data workers who are both essential



that Arendt describes in the Human Condition as the liberating action!

### **THIRD: THE COLONY OF BLOODED EYES**



Sara is a ceramic artist from Iran. I met Sara for the first time in May 2019 on the production floor as my content moderator fellow. The ceramic work shown above is the artistic outbreak of the heavy impact of five years of content moderation occupation on her subconscious as an artist.

The clockwork cleaner who is deprived of disclosure. The daily experience of the dystopian Ludovico Technique in content moderator reality and the execution of her human right of freedom and equality for political engagement in collective decisions as a migrant worker is explicitly displayed in this ceramic work produced in 2021.

This visual chapter, as the third chapter of this trilogy, is our collective narration on the impact of working as a content moderator under heavy surveillance, a culture of silence, and the promotion of

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for contemporary AI applications yet precariously employed—if at all—and politically dispersed.”  
see: <https://data-workers.org/>

anonymity. In this video, we explored and discussed in detail how ceramic artwork serves as a non-verbal language for Sara to express her emotions and thoughts. We examine how she uses her hands and body to distract herself from the space where she experiences distress and how this physical engagement is reflected in her artwork, conveying her experience in non-verbal language.

**The video can be watched [here](#).**



[www.data-workers.org](http://www.data-workers.org)