Content Curating: Managing content display on Tumblr.com

I am an avid user of the platform called *Tumblr.com* since 2012. More specifically the fandom part of it. What other parts are there? I don't know, which is precisely the point of this essay. At Tumblr, tight impenetrable info bubbles are for many users the goal. You make your experience yourself by following other users that produce or share (reblog) the content you like and by blocking and blacklisting users, tags and content that you don't want to see.

But content curating[1] is still completely dependent on human factor, purging algorithms notwithstanding. In this case your experience and ability to curate the content of your feed/dashboard (similar to timeline on Facebook, user's personal "homepage") depends on every other user as well as yourself. There are two ways how to curate content your dashboard displays: following/blocking blogs and white/blacklisting tags and content. The second makes content curating a communal activity, because it is completely dependent on (re)blogers tagging or otherwise properly textually labeling every post they share on their blog. Some do it rigorously, some occasionally, some not at all. Then it's your choice, if you keep following them, contact them to ask them to start tagging their content, or unfollow them completely. If you block someone, non of their content can find a way to your dash, while if you just unfollow someone, if someone else you follow reblogs their post, you will still see it on your dashboard. The overall take on this is: every user is responsible for the content of their dashboard and blog and its proper tagging and labeling, so the unwanted content can be filtered out by other users. More on this topic later.

Because last year Tumblr made major changes in basically every aspect of the platform, I made a new blog from scratch, to see "the hellsite"[2] in all its infamous glory.

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[1] ČERNÝ, Michal. Informační a datová gramotnost: Organizace informací. *KISK Kurz rozvoje digitálních kompetencí* [online]. [cit. 2021–02–08]. Available from: https://kisk.phil.muni.cz/digicomp/informacni-a-datova-gramotnost/organizace-informaci

[2] Twitter is a hellsite (derogatory) and tumblr is a hellsite (affectionate). *still #1 dad* [onine]. [cit. 2021–02–08]. Available from:https://romcommunist.tumblr.com/post/637539978181804032/twitter-is-a-hellsite-derogatory-and-tumblr-is-a

The first step (after registration) is to choose 5 topics of interest. The menu is rather lacking, but I've selected: Books & libraries, Literature, Tumblarians (whatever that is), Writers on Tumblr (as a subsection of Writers) and History. After your choice you are directed straight to your dashboard. At this point I had to open the platform in anonymous window, because I've forgotten my curating tools are always active and I didn't realize that until I was greeted with my "normal-looking" dashboard and not the searing pain of the official basic (uncustomized) one. For illustration:
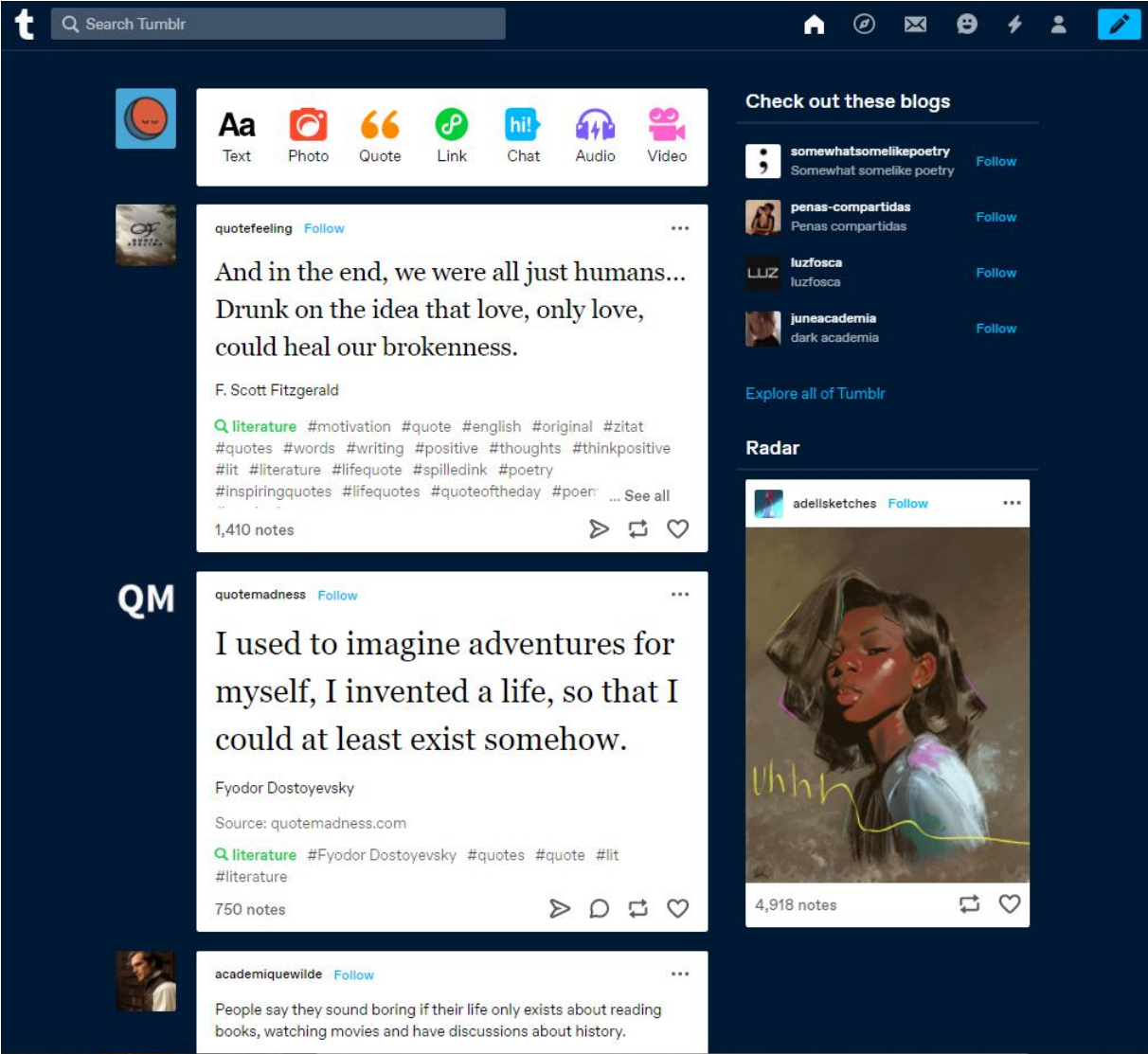

Figure 1 – Basic dashboard

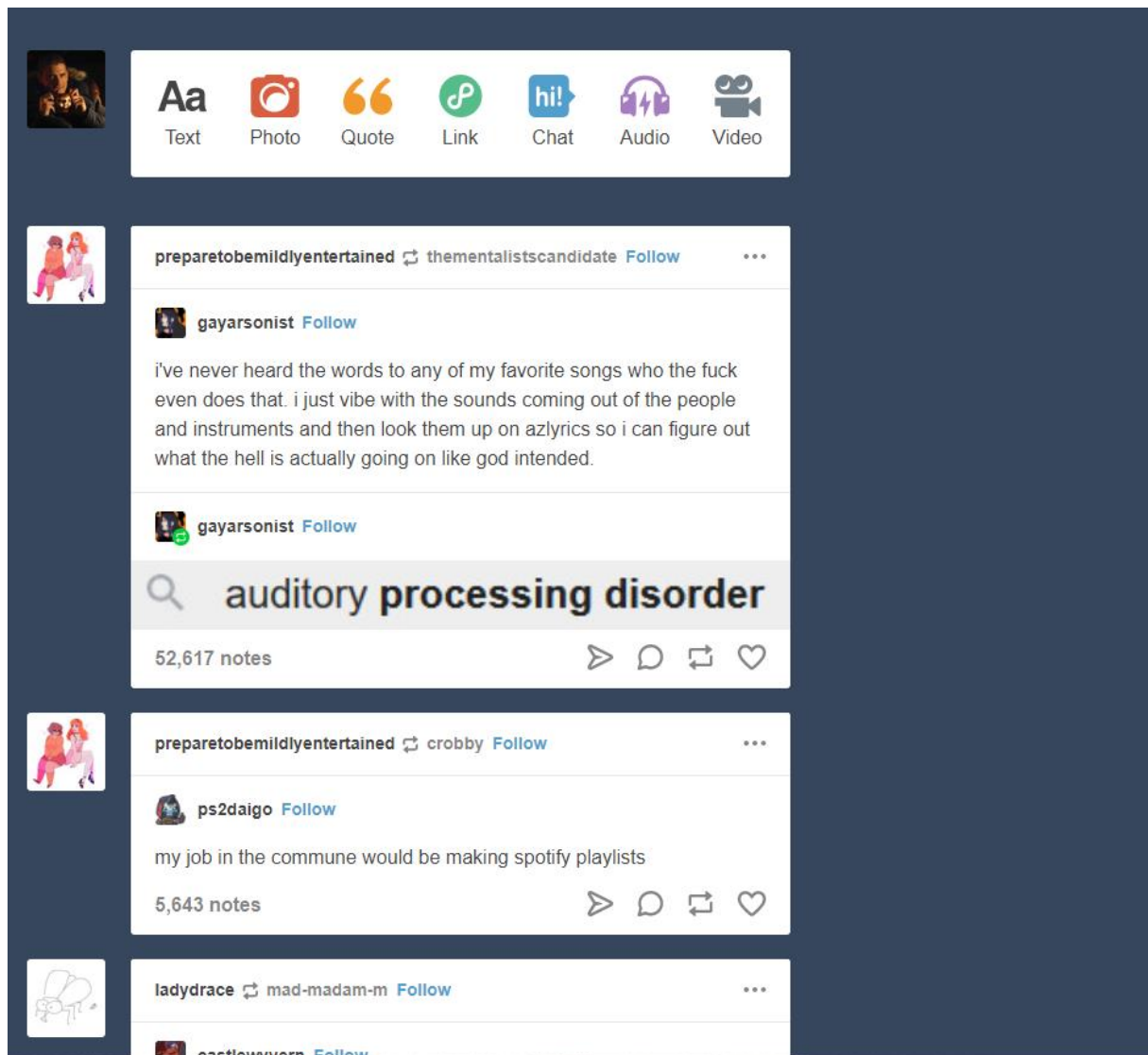In comparison with my usual dashboard curated by New XKit browser extension.

Figure 2 – Xkit dashboard + Old Blue extension

It's quite a difference! Much calmer colours that are not so hard on the eye and brain, no side panel with suggested blogs and advertisement. Even one glance on the uncostumised dash is an attack on senses (it's worse in real life, no picture can convey the true horror of that high contrast colour scheme live and blinking).

Fortunately, at the 2020 update as "the XKit" puts it:

"Tumblr has already implemented some equivalents of existing XKit features, and we're already expecting more to appear down the line. As Tumblr gains a better understanding of why and how people use XKit, we expect to see that list grow. "[3]

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[3] New XKit and the new Tumblr dashboard. *Less Broken Then You Think* [online]. [cit. 2021–02–08]. Available from:https://new-xkit-extension.tumblr.com/post/613675606820913152/new-xkit-and-the-new-tumblr-dashboard

The results of this implementation was for example one additional setting option added to the menu - "Change Palette" that instantly changes the colour schemes of the dashboard. Repeated clicks show several options, one of them is called "Low-Contrast Classic" that is (aside from that colourful new posts panel) in my opinion even better than an XKit version of "Old Blue" extension.
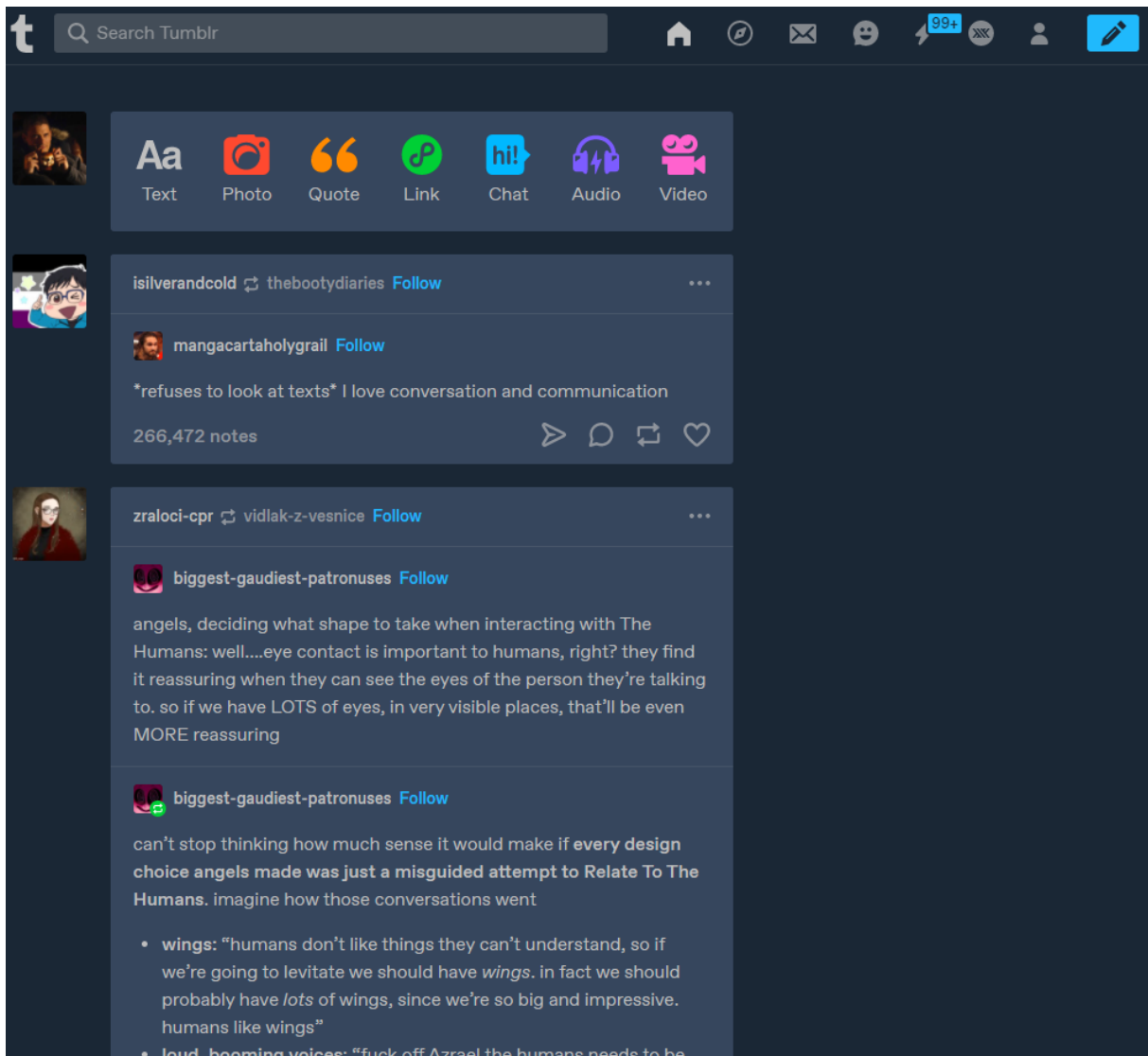

Figure 3 - XKit dashboard + Low-Contrast Classic palette option

You may be asking what does a colour scheme have to do with content curating? Well, you cannot produce or consume content if you cannot read the site.[4] On the other hand there is also no better way to deter one from using a social media site for too long or too often then to

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[4] Let me just explain why I hate this new update. *Spoilers: Everyone Dies!* [online]. [cit. 2021–02–08]. Available from:https://secret-hero-1010.tumblr.com/post/182439430608/let-me-just-explain-why-i-hate-this-new-update

make it unreadable. I used to have migraines after less than 5 minutes of scrolling, before the "Old Blue" and changeable palettes became a thing.

The Settings are divided into several sections. In the Account part, there is an option to filter tags and post content, which I primarily use the Tumblr Savior[5] for, mainly because it's a browser extension and therefore I don't have to click out of my dash every time I want to blacklist a tag. The content filtering option should, according to official description,[6] do the same only with text content, meaning if someone doesn't tag their content but the caption of the post contains a blacklisted word, it should be filtered out of your feed. Another, let us say aesthetic, feature of the Tumblr Savior is an option to completely filter out the post with blacklisted tags, so you don't even know there were any. The platform filtering on the other hand shows the blacklisted content like this:
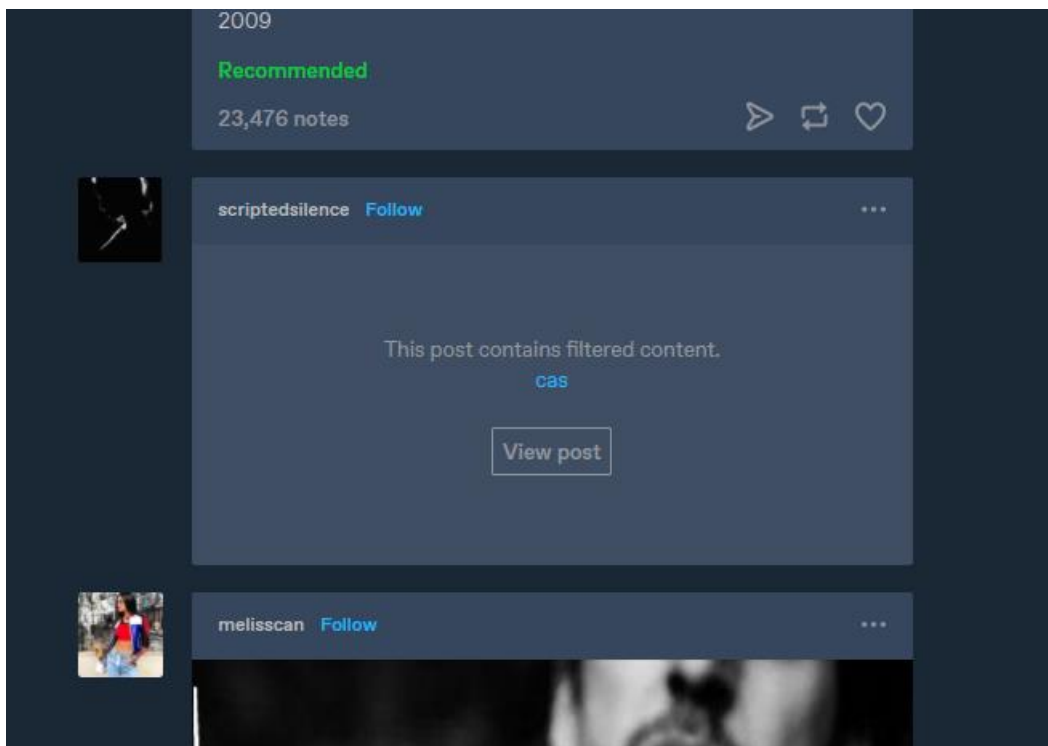

Figure 4 - Blacklist

I personally prefer not to be constantly interrupted by empty rectangles of undisplayed ads or content.

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[5] Tumblr Savior. *Bjornstar.com* [online]. [cit. 2021–02–08]. Available from: https://bjornstar.com/tumblr-savior
[6] Post content filtering. *Tumblr* [online]. [cit. 2021–02–08]. Available from: https://tumblr.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/360046752174-Post-content-filtering

The Dashboard options in the Settings curate the dash feed itself. Here is the overall hated option "Best Stuff First" – this option puts posts the algorithm thinks you'll like at the top of the feed, and this option is switched on from the beginnig. It's basically the same abracadabra that Facebook does with content its users post. But! If you switch off this option on Tumblr your feed will be in chronological order in which the posts on the blogs you follow appeared, To my knowledge Tumblr is the only „social media" platform that still has this option.

Then there is the option to switch off „recomendated" posts that „your favorite people liked", whatever that phrase means. And the last is the option to stop recomendation of the tags that you have set as following – for example the tags chosen at the beginning. Does disabling these options work? No. My dash is still full of recommended post even with every possible recommendation switched off so technically my dash should be completely empty. Those are all the immediate options the platform itself offers. I've added my personal blog as my only followed blog and the recommended post still outnumber posts from the only blog I follow.

Right now it also looks like Tumblr has some problems with displaying adds and sponsored content, because time to time a blue rectangle with the word „sponsored" appears in my feed or on the side panel and promptly disappears again without showing any content in it. I think it's because they used Flash that is no longer available. I am mildly disappointed because the Tumblr ads are a stuff of legends.[7] The ads themselves are not reblogable, but they are occasionally so unhinged people print screen them and then post them on their blogs, where they would never normally appear. For example the big „tiddy coffin"[8]:

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[7] Untitled. *KISK student research* blog [online]. [cit. 2021–02–08]. Available from: https://kiskresearchblog.tumblr.com/post/64255806803140608/pisss-offf-ghostt-phantomrose96-nightapproaches

[8] Tumblr i'm begging you please let me reblog the big tiddy coffin. *TomSka* [online]. [cit. 2021–02–08]. Available from: https://thetomska.tumblr.com/post/173671245888/tumblr-im-begging-you-please-let-me-reblog-the
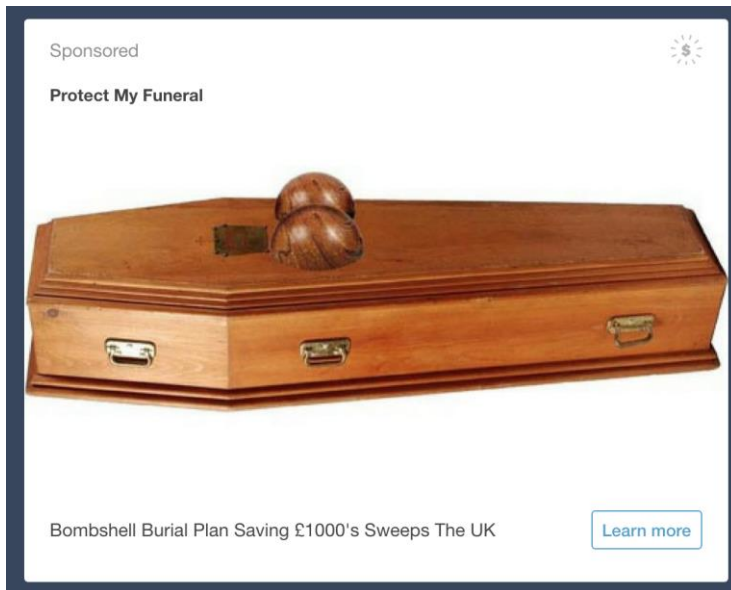
Figure 5 - tiddy coffin

So far, the platform itself offers most of the curating options I use third party tools for. But there are several quite important features that are, and some of them from the business point of view probably only ever will be, only available through XKit extension.

The first one is instant reblog. No need to click away from your dash, just hover cursor over that reblog button and you are set.
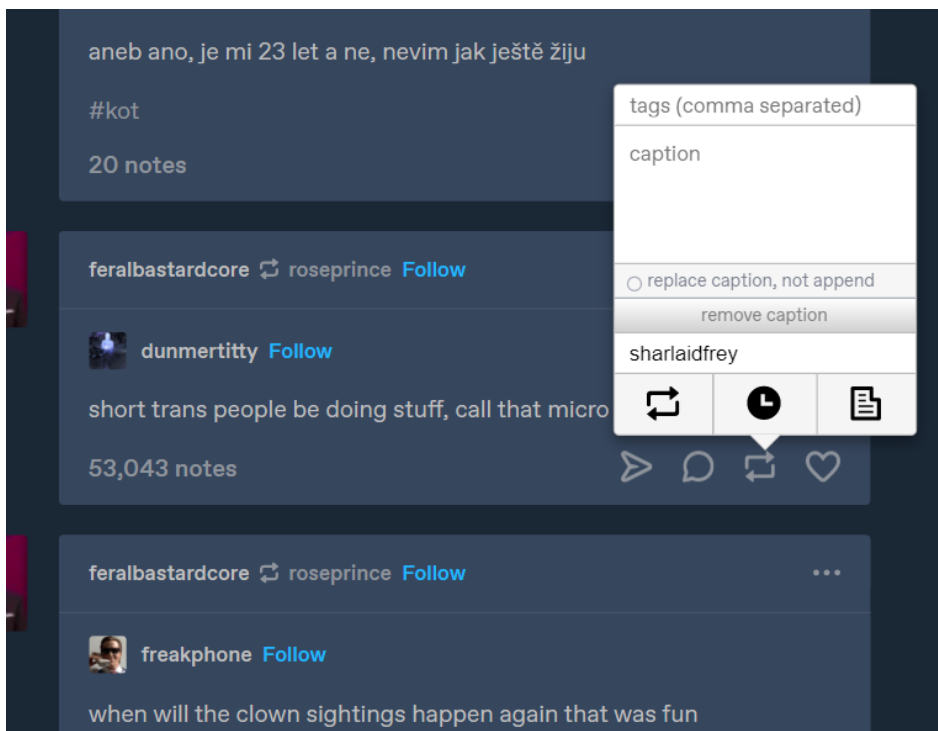

Figure 6 - XKit reblog

The original form of reblog is basically a new window opened over your dash. And if you are reblogging a long post with many pictures, loading of that reblog window takes ages.
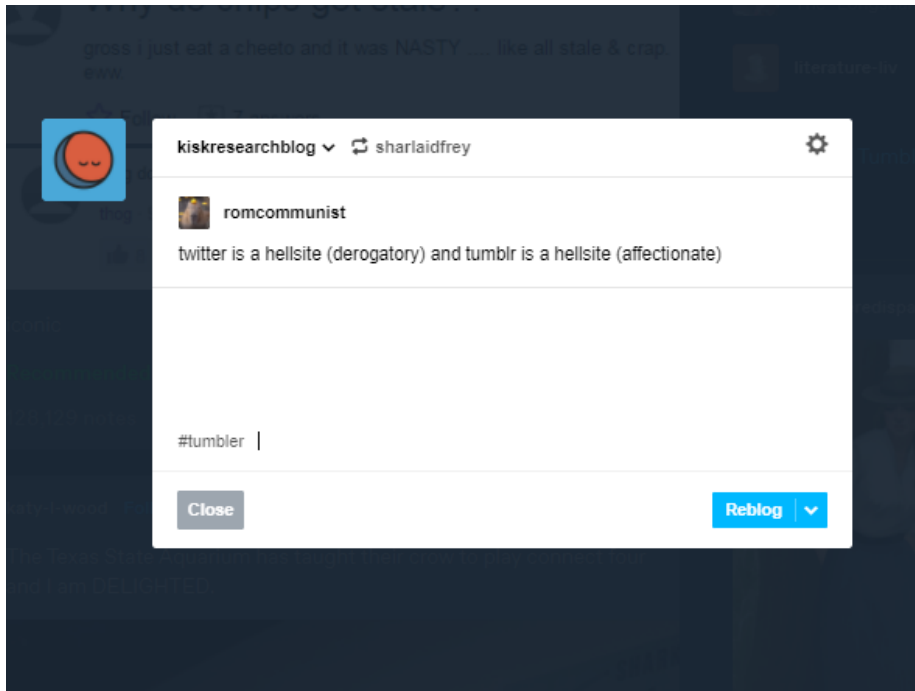

Figure 7 - basic reblog

XKit also offers extensions to filter that godawful not functioning „sponsored" panel and recommended posts, blacklisting and various accessibility extensions as well.

These were just few available extensions and options to help Tumblr users to curate their content consumption. They all allow to filter unwanted topics from one's dashboard and help users to consume their favourite content comfortably and without any disruptive elements. But the mere existence of these extensions shows that people can be responsible for what they consume and that content censorship could be transferred from corporations and governments to individuals. But also that people complaining about the content they are served are responsible for their own dissatisfaction and should be delt with accordingly. Preferably by education and wider content-curating-tools availability.

Images

All images (Figures 1 to 7) were made by me and display content belonging to platform Tumblr.com.

Sources

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