

# Best Practices for **Mental Wellness** in Content Moderation

Practical Ways to Protect Your  
Front-Line Staff



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# Introduction



Since we started WebPurify in 2006, we've learned quite a bit about the impact of viewing graphic content has on moderators. We understand that our people are our greatest asset, and that our clients rely on our team to keep their consumers—and their brand reputation—safe from the hate-fueled, violent, sexual, and deceptive content that others feel compelled to share through any available channel online.

## Here's what we know:

- 01** Content moderators, like journalists or police officers, are prone to secondary traumatic stress (also called [vicarious trauma](#)), brought on by their [continual exposure to disturbing images](#) and information.
- 02** Even the best-prepared and seemingly most resilient moderators often find that they cannot be prepared enough for the images they see.

- 03 Artificial intelligence plays a role in protecting human staff, but solid leadership decisions that prioritize employee mental health are the gold standard.
- 04 A proactive approach to mental well-being, rather than relying on self-identification of mental health problems and passive therapy, supports more staff more successfully—despite being an added cost of doing business.
- 05 Equipping teams with tools to deal with upsetting content is necessary—but attention to team-building and cultivating a sense of purpose is the main reason moderators stay at a company and perform well.

That's why we've created this straightforward guide to share the practical steps we've taken to protect our moderators with other oversight companies, in-house teams and customer service staff who may face the same challenges we do. We've included hints and tips provided by our counseling partners and trainers, who are experts in their fields and have helped us hone our approach.

We think of our team as a family—and the moderation community as a larger family with a shared noble purpose, so feel free to reach out if you have any questions or if we can be of any assistance to you.



CHAPTER 1

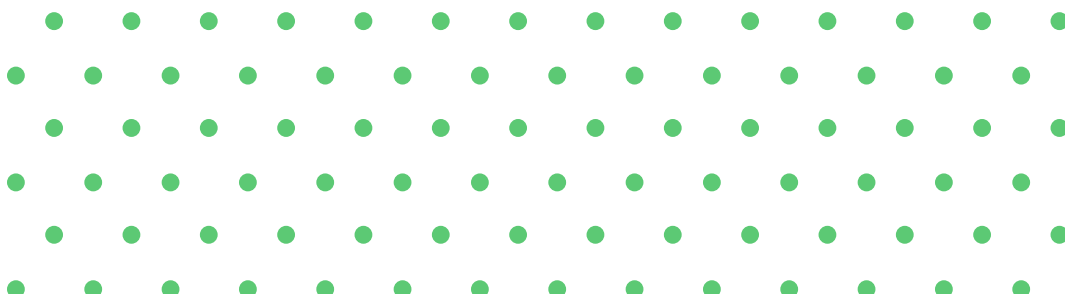
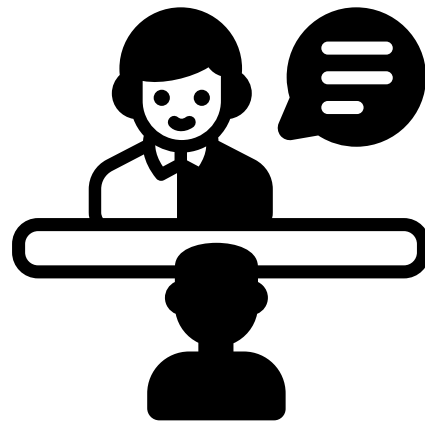
# Hiring & Orientation



The process of protecting the mental well-being of content moderators starts at the beginning. It's important to cultivate a sense of purpose in prospective and new employees to reinforce the conviction that what they are doing is important and leads to punishment for violators of both laws and morality. Inviting their ideas, feedback, and questions about their own well-being and the systems in place to protect them throughout the process helps them feel a part of a collective, mutually supportive effort.

## Interviewing

Being fully transparent with prospective employees—from the very first interview—about the type of content they will see can help them eliminate themselves from consideration if they don't feel they can do the work. Providing honest and accurate job descriptions is a good first step.



# Orientation & Training

We offer new moderators a trial period of employment, so they can take the time to learn the demands of the job and make sure it's right for them. Even those who believe they will be comfortable with the content often realize quickly that they're not.



During training, we intentionally introduce some imagery that reflects the harsher side of the material moderators encounter to be sure new employees are prepared: pornography, graphic violence, and bodily fluids, for example. Trainers check in regularly to ensure they're okay, keep a sharp eye for any concerns, and encourage trainees to express their reactions and worries openly.

Occasionally, a new moderator will choose to leave after they see the type of imagery that they'll be reviewing. More often, though, new team members become more comfortable viewing or talking about topics such as nudity or pornography, which lends the team a sense of freedom to discuss the details of their work.

CHAPTER 2

# Structure in the Workplace



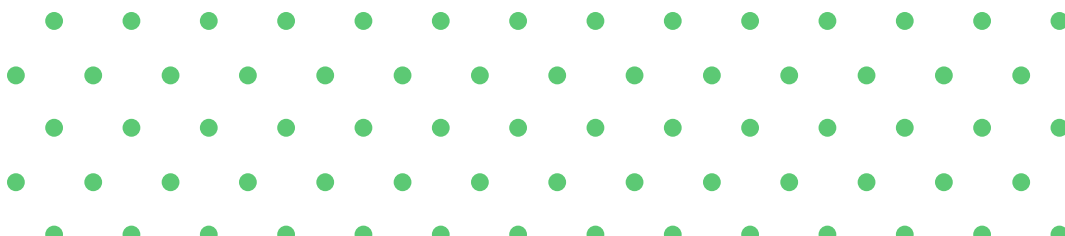
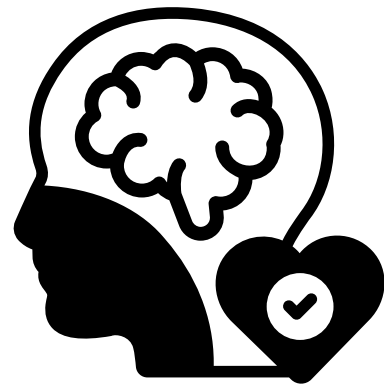


Once an employee is on board and has gone through their initial training, they should be assigned to a specific team following a particular workflow related to a specific project or type of subject matter.

Moderators should also have the opportunity to opt out of specific topics that they know or expect will be disturbing to them, such as child sexual assault, domestic violence, and other nuanced areas that may arise. Even if a moderator does opt out of a certain type of project or subject matter, there's no way to ensure they'll never be exposed to it again. Artificial intelligence is imperfect, so benign projects still occasionally receive upsetting content.

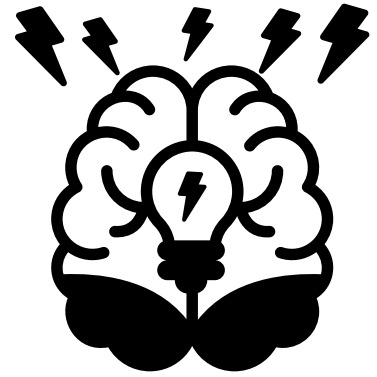
## Build in Breaks

We've found it good practice to require that moderators take breaks every two hours to limit their prolonged exposure to the content in their workflow. We also encourage them to socialize with one another—chatting throughout the day or taking time as a team to do something like shoot pool together in the office lounge.



# Stay Engaged

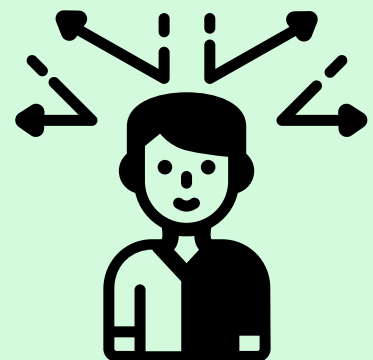
Team leaders and managers play a critical role in ensuring the mental health of the moderators they supervise. We use a rolling schedule to stay on top of both projects and personnel concerns:



- 01** Moderators check in weekly with team leads during the first few months of severe projects and regularly thereafter. Again, if a moderator finds a particular project upsetting, we can move them to a more benign one.
- 02** Team leads check in monthly with managers to brief them on any concerns or problems involving projects or people, and on the morale and well-being of each team.

# Mandate Downtime

We've found that requiring moderators to take time off every so often—not only to take their vacation time, but to take recovery days when necessary—helps them balance the world online with the world that exists in their own lives. It mitigates the toxicity that can build up from extended exposure to harsh or deceptive content on the job.



## What do WebPurify moderators do to relieve stress or anxiety during the workday?

- › Listen to music—some even have specific playlists for breaks
- › Go for a walk
- › Have tea, coffee, or a snack
- › Play pool in the lounge
- › Hang out with colleagues and talk about anything but work
- › Read newspapers or magazines in the lounge
- › Check social feeds
- › Look at personal pictures and funny videos on their phones



# Team Leads Play a Critical Role in Well-Being

Recently, one of our team leads making a routine walk around the floor noticed that a new moderator looked tired. The lead took the opportunity to stop by for a chat, to see how the moderator was feeling and ask for suggestions about improving the moderation process. The moderator expressed her appreciation, since she was developing tunnel vision and needed to be reminded to take a break.

The monotony of the job rivals the exposure to disturbing content when it comes to what most challenges staff. As moderators review image after image, with more in the queue, they can begin to feel isolated and disconnected from those around them. Some are more social or better at self-regulating than others.

That's where team leads come in. One of the primary responsibilities a team lead has is to understand their team members' mental health and identify who may need support—as well as what kind. Some may need to be reminded to step away from the screen—and others might benefit from encouragement to sign up for the company sports program.

Our team leads often keep simple notes about each moderator's successes at work and home, hobbies, family and friend support, and challenges on the job. This equips the leader to encourage and support individual moderators according to their own unique circumstances—which may be by reminding a moderator of their many interests and priorities outside of work, when the tasks of moderation become monotonous or disturbing.



CHAPTER 3

# Tools & Training



There are a couple of simple steps that we've found helpful in reducing the impact of disturbing content on our moderators. You can take advantage of similar options in your workflow to better protect your moderators' well-being.

## Modify Moderation Tools

We use a proprietary tool we've tweaked over the last 16 years so that it presents content in formats that limit impact on the moderator. We've found these modifications significantly reduce emotional response and psychological impact on teams reviewing disturbing content:



Present images and video in **grayscale**, rather than in color

**Storyboard videos** by turning them into a checkerboard of still frames, rather than a moving image



The use of **interactive blurring of images** helps moderators reduce exposure to harmful content by allowing them to temporarily unblur small regions at a time, without sacrificing accuracy or speed.

# Prepare the Team

Whether you're adding a new member to an existing team or preparing a team to begin work on a new project, working with some types of content requires special readiness. For example, when a project is likely to contain a lot of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), we bring in an expert in this field to prepare the team for the type of content they may see and the reactions they can expect to experience.

This training affords moderators the same techniques that law enforcement officers employ to cope with their exposure to disturbing situations. It focuses on the importance of the moderator to the universe of online users. It also reveals the way brain chemistry reacts to various types of exposure, so that moderators can understand that their emotional reactions are not unique, but are driven by science—and are shared with other human beings.



Moderators also gain practical approaches to use in tempering the effects of the images they view. For example, quickly scanning imagery before diving into it can limit its shock value. So can the practice of reviewing images first in a small view, expanding only when it's necessary to see the full scope of the content. Finally, viewers are also advised to make up a story for the material they see, and to give that story the ending they would like it to have.

## What do WebPurify moderators do in their spare time to relax and disconnect from work?

- Yoga, meditation, exercise, or play sports
- Read and write
- Listen to music
- Watch movies and TV
- Spend time with family and friends
- Garden
- Religious activities, like praying or going to a place of worship
- Resting and/or prioritizing quality sleep
- Hobbies: singing, cooking, playing video games, etc.





CHAPTER 4

# Professional Counseling



Beyond work you can do on your own, you may find it helpful to partner with a professional counseling firm or wellness organization that has the expertise and staffing required to offer specialized mental health support to your moderators.

## 24/7 Support Services

It's important to find a partner whose therapists and coaches are qualified to practice in their field—which typically means they have a master's degree or higher. These professionals should also have training in cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness, two methodologies that are often particularly suited to the needs of moderators.



Be sure your partner's offerings accommodate both your staff's schedule

and unique needs where mental health is concerned:

01

A structured online stress program, usually several weeks with a coach

02

Support for relationships and marriage, as well as nutrition and physical wellness

03

Professional counseling available 24/7 by phone without an appointment

04

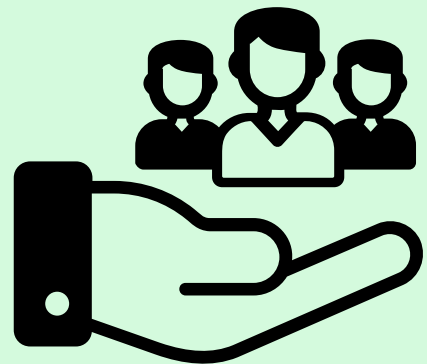
Additional 24/7 support by chat and email

Most of our staff take advantage of fully confidential counseling sessions by phone. This allows them to maintain anonymity and to avail themselves of resources at times they find convenient.

## Constant Internal Promotion of Mental Health Services

No matter how great the service offerings are, they don't work if your staff doesn't know they exist—or if employees aren't secure in the knowledge that their use of the services is confidential.

Take advantage of any means possible to notify and remind your staff that you are working with professional counselors to provide a confidential employee wellness and assistance program.



Specify it is designed to support the mental health of online content moderators, as well as to provide general mental health coaching and therapy.

### Consider using:

- 1 In-office posters and stand-ups that reinforce the confidentiality of services.
- 2 Emails and videos to deliver actionable content about topics including nutrition, exercise, stress management and more
- 3 Direct mail to employee homes
- 4 An introduction during new-employee orientation
- 5 Learning moments during team or all-hands meetings



CHAPTER 5

# Resources for Resilience



Among the benefits of joining forces with a professional counseling service is the access it provides to preventive resources that benefit your staff and your company over time. We've found it helpful to throw the doors wide open and use everything our counseling partner offers.

## Relaxation & Mindfulness

Counselors are not only available to assist when a problem arises. They're also coaches who can help moderators learn relaxation and mindfulness techniques. Some will offer your staff unlimited access by phone and chat.

Others may augment this by recommending an app such as [Calm](#) or [Headspace](#) to help your employees develop and maintain these skills.



# Self-Help Library

Making materials available onsite and online ensures that moderators can help themselves, even if they don't feel the need to meet with a counselor. Onsite, you might choose to stock a bookshelf with material about various psychological topics. Online, your counseling partner can provide access to motivational and inspirational videos, as well as numerous articles on subjects of interest in mental well-being.



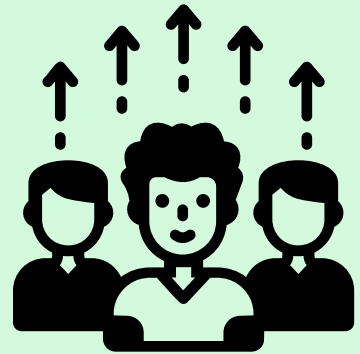
# Regular Self-Assessments

Not every moderator will recognize the source of a problem right away. To help staff understand why “something’s just off,” most counseling partners make online self-assessments available for stress, depression, anxiety, mindfulness, and health-related quality of life.



# Optional Workshops

For some employees, taking time out from the workday to attend a workshop is a form of stress relief in itself. You might want to offer several options intended both to confront stress head-on and to help your staff develop healthy life skills. These may include, among others:

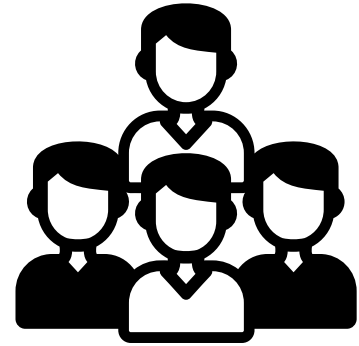


- Cognitive behavioral therapy
- Mindfulness for leadership teams
- Sensitization training for managers
- Sleep habits
- Gratitude habits





# Ongoing Program Assessment



When you partner with professional counselors and invest in resources for your employees, you want to make sure that your efforts are paying off. An initial focus on measuring use, followed by simple, ongoing assessments, will get the job done.

## MONTHLY MANAGEMENT BRIEFINGS

Allow counseling partners to deliver confidential reports about the use of mental health services for work, relationships, or healthy living assistance, offer recommendations, and propose action plans.

## QUARTERLY STATISTICAL REPORTS

Provide a way to read patterns and trends in participation, assessments, virtual and onsite counseling, referrals and follow-ups, and survey results that indicate changes in stress levels, mood, and satisfaction with the resources offered.

## BIANNUAL TOWN HALLS

Give staff the chance to hear from one another about stressors and to work together to determine possible solutions.



## ANNUAL WELL-BEING SURVEYS

Use a stress assessment and well-being index to measure the workplace situation and program effects.

We've found it helpful to include only our senior managers in the review of monthly usage statistics. Although the users remain anonymous, our counseling partners share details about the concerns they expressed. If there's an unusual increase in use, particularly citing work stress, we speak with the whole affected team, may provide workshops on the topic, and encourage those experiencing issues to approach us. From there, we can give them opportunities to mitigate the experiences by changing the projects they're moderating.

### What wellness resources do WebPurify staff find most helpful?

- The Tranquil app, which is much like the “Calm” app—a “quick fix that doesn't take much time or effort”
- Cricket and badminton initiatives—they “have been crucial in team building”
- Private counseling by phone



# Find a Passion to Pursue

Through the process of addressing work stress, one of our moderators became interested in meditation. She was intrigued by the potential the practice might have to relieve overall stress.

In our library, she found a book called *The Headspace Guide to Meditation & Mindfulness*. After taking it home to study, she developed a regular meditation practice and is reaping the benefits in numerous areas of her life.



CHAPTER 6

# In It Together



The idea of approaching work with an “all for one and one for all” attitude isn’t just for The Three Musketeers. It can make the difference between isolation and mutual support for content moderators.

## Team Seating & Monthly Cafeteria Sessions

An employee’s seatmates set the tone for their day. Encouraging people who are working on the same project to sit next to one another helps team members share their concerns with one another naturally throughout the day.

This organic ability to offer mutual support often takes the form of humor. It’s sometimes very dark, but it’s a great way of relieving stress. Breaking bread together (Cafeteria Sessions) as a team each month provides another opportunity to discuss challenges and responses.



# Gratitude Wall

Consider dedicating one of the office walls to post-it notes from employees expressing their gratitude for one another. You can also post notes of thanks and praise from clients or their users, so your staff receives the same messages of satisfaction that you do.



# Recognizing Wide-Ranging Impact

Moderators benefit from a reminder that their work matters, not only to individuals online, but to those in the wider world, in a very direct and meaningful way.

When we identify and report child sexual abuse material (CSAM), law enforcement usually gets involved. We've helped to put some very bad people in jail. From initial training through ongoing work, we remind our staff that they are not just clicking labels on images; they're making a significant impact they don't always see. To reinforce the message, we've even started sharing data from our clients about accounts shut down—and arrests.

For our part, we have many anecdotes with happy outcomes. For example, we took part in a project where all the content we approved appeared on a jumbo screen in Times Square. We streamed a feed of the screen into our offices in real time, so the moderators would see what was being shown. They would first review an image on their own monitor and, if they accepted it, see it on a jumbo screen in NYC seconds later. This drove home to our team that what felt like simply clicking a label on a piece of content, was in fact protecting thousands of kids visiting the Big Apple from seeing some awful images people tried to post.



# Fun & Games

Getting out of the office with workmates is a safe way to let off steam with people who understand the dark humor and environment that may characterize daily interaction. Trivia nights and other games that might be hosted at a restaurant, pub, or even an employee's home, are popular options.

A shared love of a particular sport can provide another outlet. In our case, there is a cricket field and badminton courts just a few blocks from our office. We sponsor teams, which has created quite a friendly rivalry between our image and video moderators. We're not aware of other companies that have a formal, tournament-model sports program with a monthly schedule.

The key with these out-of-office activities is to offer them, but not force them. They should be an outlet for employees to enjoy, rather than an added source of stress. The goal is really to promote friendship-building and to bolster team members' confidence to talk to one another on good days and those that are harder.

We've also found it helpful to schedule fun activities in the office since we operate around the clock, 24/7. We celebrate holidays, birthdays, and career anniversaries together—and crown sports tournament winners—with cakes and special treats. That way, everyone is involved, including those who are on shift during the event.





## What techniques of their own have WebPurify moderators found helpful in reducing stress?

- Indulge myself in binge-watching a web series
- Going out and hanging out with friends
- Yoga, meditation, or religious activities
- Physical activity: running, swimming, aerobics, dancing, etc.
- Hobbies, like drawing or cooking or reading books
- Giving myself some “me” time
- Talking to close friends about what’s bothering me and taking their input about how to deal with it



# Share the Saves: They Matter

Let your moderators know about the ways their work has mattered to individuals. Use concrete examples about “saves” in which your team played a critical part.

For example, one of our teams was moderating submissions to a review platform. A child wrote a review asking for help. He said he’d been kidnapped and his phone was about to die. He gave the name of the person who kidnapped him and a rough description of his location.

Upon seeing this information, our team immediately flagged it as high priority and it was reported to the police. They, in turn, were able to locate the child rapidly and deliver him home safely.

We’ve identified grooming behavior directed toward children in a chat stream and flagged child sexual abuse material in a product customization project. In both cases, our team’s diligence resulted in alerts to law enforcement and the rapid arrest of child predators. We’ve also identified self-harm (cutting and burning) uploaded by a specific young user—which we reported to the client and to law enforcement, resulting in the user’s parents intervening.

In each case, we had the pleasure of delivering news of the positive outcome to our eagle-eyed team, helping reinforce the importance of their work—as well as one of our credos, which is that every single image matters.



CHAPTER 7

# Emergency Contingencies



No matter how well you prepare and care for your team, in any industry, there is always the chance that a staff member may make a suicide threat if personal and professional pressures grow beyond their ability to manage. An employee may even die. We are fortunate that we've never faced a suicide or even a threat among our staff in all of our years in business, but we are constantly aware that it could happen and that we need to be prepared.

Having the support of crisis counseling specialists is critical under these circumstances. Dealing with the impact of a suicide or a threat of suicide is far beyond the training of nearly any human resources team.

## Intervention

If an employee makes a threat to do harm to himself or others, or appears to be suffering, it's important to arrange professional intervention as rapidly as possible.

Proactivity is critical to the success of the effort.

Crisis counselors are trained to intervene in ways that will prevent harm and promote well-being. Their methods are directed toward curing not only the immediate situation, but addressing an employee's underlying stress, anxiety, depression, or despair.



# Personal Counseling

Having a 24/7 helpline can ensure that employees never have to wait to reach a professional who can offer psychological help and, potentially, keep a threat from escalating.

Even better, in a crisis situation, you will want professional counselors to come to your office to meet with staff onsite. Personal connection and rapid response make a difference in the way your employees process extremely difficult situations.



# Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD)

In the event of a suicide threat or the death of an employee, your entire team is likely to need professional help. For example, our counseling partner is set up to provide an onsite visit within 24 hours of the crisis event.

From there, they can provide psychological support to the employee, in the case of a suicide threat—and equally importantly, to any affected staff.



We are grateful that we have never needed this service, but we find it reassuring to know this special assistance is available.

## What surprises WebPurify staff most about moderating graphic content?

- I never knew this type of content existed.
- The initial shock when I first saw a graphic image soon subsided and it simply just became part of the job
- Not seeing anything I have not seen before; I'm just seeing it more often, which doesn't bother me
- Sometimes what you see sticks with you
- How cruel people can be



# Wrap Up



The bottom line is that moderators who feel cared for and supported, part of a team, appreciated, and valued tend to stay on staff longer than those who don't. We've found that applies whether a person is seeing content moderation as simply a source of income or as a career and a calling. Those with longer tenure often advance into quality control, training, team leadership, subject matter expertise, and management.

Interestingly, most of the WebPurify moderators who move on to other jobs do not leave due to the work, but due to their own priorities and career aspirations. That reason holds, even though our moderators working with general user-generated content encounter about 360 severe images each week—and those working on higher-risk projects, reviewing content that's been reported by users or flagged by artificial intelligence, review about 10,000 images or videos with varying degrees of severity in the same timeframe.

We've found that our investment in the mental health of our moderators increases job satisfaction. With adequate staffing, the breaks in process that moderators need to clear their minds and manage stress levels and emotional reactions make no impact on productivity. And our investment in social and recreational outlets for moderators' energy and emotions has paid off many times over.

WebPurify invites you to join us in recognizing the critical role content moderators play in maintaining the safety of the online viewing public, as well as the vital importance of mental health in moderators' workplace success and overall well-being.





WebPurify is a leader in the moderation industry, specializing in content screening and categorization, image and video meta tagging, live video stream monitoring, product review curation, and community guideline enforcement. We protect brands from the many risks associated with user generated content.

Designed for scalable high volume content review, WebPurify offers 24/7 live moderation teams in addition to advanced artificial intelligence solutions. With over 16 years of experience, we draw from an expansive knowledge base and suite of proprietary tools to create unparalleled custom moderation solutions, unique to each of our clients' brand needs.

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