

Black Interaction with a Whitewashed Internet

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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The concept of the digital divide is not a new one in the study of technology and society, referring to an inequity in the distribution of modern technology to different groups of people. While there are different, specific instances of the digital divide which can be investigated as a result of particular social, economic, or racial factors, the specific instance of the digital divide examined in this research paper will be centered on the challenges Black Internet users face in the United States. Specifically, the focus will be on the ways in which the mainstream internet is “whitewashed” and conflicts with Black cultural and conversational values, as well as how Black internet users have overcome these obstacles to create enriching online communities.

History of the Digital Divide

Historically, a major contributing factor to any digital divide is a disparity in technology access among groups, and this specific divide is no exception. According to Baker (2014), many states exhibit school district funding inequities, with certain states such as Illinois and Philadelphia doing so at an extremely high rate. The result of this is that poorly funded urban school districts have less budget to spend on computers which results in less time spent interacting with the Internet. Considering that Black people make up a higher percentage of the metro population than the nonmetro population in almost every U.S. state (RHIhub, 2019) and that this difference is extremely significant in the aforementioned Illinois and Philadelphia, it seems that educational access to technology is generally harder to come by for African Americans. In combination with the fact that African Americans have historically struggled with generational poverty due to other institutions of structural racism in the United States (Tennial, 2008), one begins to understand the historical origins of this digital divide to be largely an issue of inequitable infrastructure.

Moving Beyond the Conventional Definition of a Digital Divide

While the introductory information presented so far has not been incorrect and is important to gain a rudimentary understanding of the digital divide, it is far from sufficient to fully summarize the digital divide. Examining technology access and usage in such a binary manner completely ignores the characteristics of the individuals in question, such as ease of access, limitations of their engagement, and various social factors. To examine the digital divide through such an unsophisticated lens is not only incorrect but irresponsible and possibly even racist.

The goal of this research paper is to move beyond this vague notion of a digital divide being characterized by technology access and instead examine the divide from a software perspective; how Black technology users interact with applications and information on a “whitewashed” internet which does not lend itself to Black cultural values, as well as how Black Americans have dealt with and overcome these obstacles. To properly examine this, the first section of my research will be devoted to developing a more complete and nuanced definition of the digital divide.

A More Nuanced Digital Divide

As stated, the first step to exploring this divide is to establish a more in-depth definition of a digital divide. Neil Selwyn (2004) does an excellent job of this, arguing that defining Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as a binary “have” or “have-not” is a rudimentary analysis. Instead, he believes policymakers should place greater emphasis on understanding what is meant by “access”, “use”, and “engagement”.

Consider two hypothetical people, in which one has access to the internet in their home and the other has access by using a computer in their public library. A binary system would simply say that both users have access, so there cannot be a divide. However, the access for the second person is obviously much less convenient, which one would expect to manifest in less interaction with said technology. Furthermore, the library computers may forbid this person from using certain applications or downloading certain files, which would limit the types of engagement that they can experience from the technology. This is a specific example, but by employing actor-network theory, you can imagine the complex web of social relationships that every potential technology user is involved in and how it changes their ability to access technology. Perhaps they have theoretical access but a stubborn landlord refuses to fix the spotty internet, or maybe their social group discourages them from going to a library. Regardless of the reason, actor-network theory helps to digest the magnitude of factors that influence a person's relationship with technology.

Based on this idea, Selwyn (2004) encourages the separation of “theoretical access” and “effective access”, which accounts for the impacts of individuals' social networks on their perceived access. He also separates “use” and “access”, with use being any contact with ICT and engagement being “meaningful” use in which the user has control over how they interact, and the result is something that they consider productive. In the following sections of the paper, I will refer back to these definitions and use them to explain the digital divide of software. While Black technology users may have theoretical access, a variety of social actors limit their effective access and potential engagement on various platforms.

Black Interaction with a Whitewashed Internet

In theory, the Internet is a distributed network of information and communication, the sum total of human knowledge which can be accessed and utilized by anyone at any time. This is not the reality, however, as the vast majority of the content offered on the Internet is implicitly structured to appeal to a general audience that may not well represent all users. In the context of the United States, this often manifests in the form of content curated towards the interests of middle and upper-middle-class white men. Despite the ever-increasing diversity of Internet users, the nature of the Internet continues to promote information and news for “mainstream audiences.” As Brock (2011) notes, multinational websites will often layout information similarly but the information itself will be “topically divergent” depending on the country of access. Contrast this with accessing an American-based website in which race is a profile setting, where one would almost assuredly not expect the content of the site to change. In this way, the Internet fails to account for the cultural impact of information presentation in an equitable manner.

André Brock’s Analysis of “Real Thugs”

The main focus of Brock’s aforementioned paper is an investigation of *Freakonomics*’ “Real Thugs” series and the online dialogue that resulted from this. Before discussing the conclusions Brock reached about racial identity and online safe spaces, some brief background on the subject is necessary. *The Wire* is a police drama set in Baltimore with a majority African American cast, in contrast to the common whitewashing of popular television series wherein casts will be entirely white despite taking place in cities with large Black populations (Brock offers *Friends* as an example of this phenomena). *Freakonomics* blogger Sudhir Venkatesh then posted a series of interviews with anonymous gangsters, who readers are led to believe are African American and New York-based, in an effort to determine the credibility of *The Wire*’s

portrayal of gang life. This also had the side effect of sparking several conversations about online racial identity, both in the interviews with the gangsters as well as in the comments of the blog posts.

The Concept of Online Black Spaces

One of the main points of controversy came in the fourth installment of the interview series, in which Shine (one of the Thugs) inquires about the readers of *Freakonomics*, and Flavor (another Thug) makes a confident statement that they must be white. The interview goes on to request comments from readers about the plot of the show, but that small offhanded comment highlights a significant component of online race relations; the idea that certain sites are simply intended for certain racial demographics.

Many commenters on this post chose to begin their message with a racial identifying statement, with those who identified as Black seeming somewhat offended by this assumption. For example, one said, “tell your new viewing partners to open their minds.” In response to comments of this type, Tony-T (another Thug) proclaimed that “no self-respecting black man would feel good about reading the New York Times. I got something for you: its called the Amsterdam News,” referencing a popular Black-owned newspaper in New York. This statement indicates that Tony-T feels that certain online resources are for white people, and others are for Black people. Furthermore, he believes that it is a betrayal of a Black man’s racial identity to seek out resources that are for white people.

This line of thinking connects directly to Selwyn’s definition of access; despite having theoretical access to white-associated sites like the New York Times, some Black people may not have effective access due to cultural values. Actor-Network theory would dictate that there

are a variety of social factors which could contribute to this feeling. It could be as simple as wanting to support Black-owned businesses for some, while others may not trust that white-associated websites have their best interests at heart. Regardless, this sense of a Black online community and an associated policy of online isolationism is a significant contributor to the software digital divide.

A Lack of Online Identity

Another issue in this case study is the structure of the commenting system on the *Freakonomics* website. Comments are manually screened to ensure that they do not contain offensive language, but Brock notes that the actual code of the website lacks the common “reply chain” structure. As such, commenters can only really engage with Venkatesh and the Thugs and have no channel to reply to their fellow readers. This prevents any sort of open dialogue between readers themselves.

In addition to preventing any type of open communication between readers who would like to challenge each other’s beliefs, this system also inherently limits the degree to which readers are able to establish their reputation within the community and gain credibility. Each comment reflects only a small part of an individual’s beliefs and is formulated in response to a specific element of the interview. In the context of the Black community, this makes it more difficult to engage in racial dialogues with a need to constantly redefine their identity. Prefacing each statement with “As a Black person” is indeed cumbersome, and does not sufficiently summarize the context of their upbringing which lead to the development of their point of view. Considering the importance of “Blackness” for many African Americans’ sense of identity, this creates a limit on the level of engagement that Black users can experience on platforms that lack comment threading. Using actor-network theory, it seems clear that online communication which

masks identity creates limitations on the degree to which Black users may interact with certain systems, as well as other actors on those systems.

Mutual Repulsion

Another contributor to the software digital divide is noted by Nakamura (2006). She notes that historically, instances of online conversation about racial justice and identity have been limited at best, and nonexistent at worst. In most typical online spaces, she believes users have an aversion to discussing online racial identity, and claims that a theory of mutual repulsion is the explanation. In short, online users outside of niche online environments are disinterested in or even made uncomfortable by racial discourse. As a result of this, those that have an interest in discussing racial identity or similar topics do not receive acceptable levels of engagement, and may move to other, more niche online spaces. This can have a compounding effect of normalizing this aversion of general users, contributing to the subconscious othering between these two groups.

Some basic sociology may be helpful in examining the causes of this phenomenon. White fragility refers to the phenomenon wherein many white people, even those who would consider themselves proponents of justice and allies to the Black community, are uncomfortable talking about race (DiAngelo, 2016). When racial discourse, or even just racial identity, is brought up, they will change the topic or accuse the other person of being “obsessed with race.” Racial battle fatigue is a product of this behavior, detailing the psychological and emotional impact on Black people of dealing with these microaggressions on a regular basis (McGowan, 2021). This exhaustion can lead to a policy of social-cultural isolationism, which neatly parallels the mutual repulsion theory detailed prior. In the greater context of actor-network theory and our framework of access, use, and engagement, the common white fragility response is an agent which limits the

effective access and engagement that Black users can get out of the internet despite considerable theoretical access.

The Development of Online Black Spaces

To this point, my research has largely explored the negative aspects of racial identity and the reasons that Black people face additional challenges in engaging with mainstream online resources. However, this does not fully contextualize the story of the online digital divide, which in fact opens up opportunities for online Black community development. This section of my research is devoted to understanding how the online Black community has recognized and adapted to the aforementioned challenges, and the ways in which they have adapted to these challenges to create culturally enriching and fulfilling online spaces.

Brock (2009) compares these online Black spaces to the historical applications of Black-owned barbershops and beauty salons. That is, they provide a forum for the kind of culturally familiar citizen discourse that was once limited to private conversations for Black people in America. Conversations can range from culture to current events, and the relative racial homogeneity of the environment increases the likelihood of aligned moral and political views. The ability for participating members to have intimate discussions in a comfortable manner with an audience composed primarily of fellow members of the Black community is the identifying feature of a Black online space.

Black Twitter

While far from the only Black online space, Black Twitter stands out as the prime example due to its size, popularity, and visibility to non-Black people otherwise known as the out-group. Smith (2011) reported that 25% of Black internet users used Twitter as compared to

only 9% of white internet users, which would imply that it makes up a significant portion of Black internet. Technologically, the platform has many of the features outlined previously which maximize the engagement that Black users can experience. User accounts have a bio where they can post identifying information, a profile picture to identify themselves, and comment threading to enable users to have open conversations. These combine to empower Black users to develop and display a strong sense of online racial identity, which promotes more intimate cultural exchanges and a stronger sense of online community.

Signifyin'

Twitter also lends itself well to the African American practice of signifyin' (or signifying) wherein individuals will exchange somewhat antagonistic wordplay in a non-serious manner, possibly with the intent of demonstrating masculinity or dominance. Brock (2012) suggests a model in which the hashtag facilitates this process. Twitter's decision to use hashtags as a style of content curation means that using a hashtag promotes the tweet to a certain audience, in this case, the "signified" from which the original tweeter wants a response. It also identifies the "sign", or the content about which the signifyin' occurs.

Given the public nature of Twitter and the aforementioned usage of hashtags to curate tweets to accounts, signifyin' via tweet then fulfills the performative aspect of the practice and enables the "verbal fighting for dominance" that often characterizes it. The hashtag becomes a sort of beacon to other members of Black Twitter that this tweet is culturally relevant and should spark conversation. In this way, Twitter fulfills the criteria needed for signifyin' and enables Black users to do so in real-time, and the audience with which they do so becomes curated to other Black users depending on the cultural relevance of the "sign" as determined by their hashtag usage. Considering this through the lens of actor-network theory, Twitter's infrastructure

physically allows Black users to expand their audience, which in turn results in more actors communicating and enriching each other's online experiences.

Discussion

What I have uncovered throughout my research is an often-overlooked aspect of the racial digital divide, one which is characterized by the content on the internet rather than infrastructure or economic inequities. The vast majority of content on the web is made to appeal to as general an audience as possible, which usually translates to white, middle-class males in America. This leads to sites being structured in a way that does not appeal to the more culturally intimate style of conversation that characterizes African American exchanges, and contributes to cultural perceptions that some sites are “for whites”. When white people use technology, we often consider them to be doing so “as people”; their culture and background often do not have a significant impact on the content with which they interact. Black people, on the other hand, are made to often feel marginalized and out of place on the wider internet due to an arrangement of content and information that does not suit their cultural values. The result is that African Americans on mainstream websites may experience less effective access to resources due to these mental obstacles.

Despite this, Black Americans still use and contribute to the internet significantly, and have been able to overcome the whitewashed hegemony of the modern internet. In the case of Black Twitter, Black internet users are empowered to establish an online cultural and racial identity, and use the site's method of content curation to conversate with fellow Black internet users in culturally familiar and engaging ways. It is important to note that Black Twitter is only one example of an online Black space, and was studied primarily for its familiarity to the general

public. Future research would benefit from the analysis of other online Black spaces, such as BlackPlanet (Byrne, 2008).

Regardless of the inspiring story of online cultural liberation, it is important to remember that these struggles were born out of the software inequities that characterize the digital divide, and work should still be done to alleviate these differences. A good place to start would be incorporating more ways to establish an online identity on any website with social components. This allows users to openly display racial identity and establish social credibility among other frequent users. Comment threading also allows for direct communication between users rather than just shouting into the void of a list of comments. In giving users more channels to openly express aspects of their identity, the software will inherently become more inclusive and accessible to Black people.

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