Society Online: The Internet in Context

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Contributors: Lisa Nakamura
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Interrogating the Digital Divide: The Political Economy of Race and Commerce in New Media

LisaNakamura, University of Wisconsin-Madison

“Kill your television” bumper stickers are very popular in many American cities, and we all have come across people who deliberately abstain from television. They are not framed as backward or on the wrong side of a technological divide. If anything, they are considered to know more about media than do most people. Their position usually garners respect because it represents a critique of televisions oppressive mass media qualities such as manipulative commercials, ethnic and racial stereotyping, and sexualized violence. Those who do not watch television are often perceived as intelligent, savvy, and discriminating consumers who have a critical perspective on media. And it follows that members of oppressed and marginalized groups are clearly those who lose the least by killing their televisions given that theirs are the images most frequently exploited, commodified, and misrepresented by that medium.[1]

The assumption in much discourse regarding the digital divide is that the internet is somehow exempt from the critiques that we make of television and that it is de facto “enriching.” In addition, and paradoxically, the internet is thought to have more in common with “popular” media forms than with mass ones because of its supposed openness and interactivity; theoretically, any user can post his or her own content to it. In practice, however,

> The most striking change to occur in the late 1990s has been the quick fade of euphoria of those who saw the Internet as providing a qualitatively different and egalitarian type of journalism, politics, media, and culture. The indications are that the substantive content of this commercial media in the Internet, or any subsequent digital communication system, will look much like what currently exists. (McChesney, 1998, p. 24)

Despite the internet's vaunted interactivity, during recent years it has shifted from “being a participatory medium that serves the interests of the public to being a broadcast medium where corporations deliver consumer-oriented information. Interactivity would be reduced to little more than sales transactions and e-mail” (Beacham, as quoted in McChesney, 1998, p. 24).

Despite this state of affairs, in the popular imagination, the internet gets to have it both ways; unlike television, film, and other mass media, it is still perceived as inherently educational (perhaps because it is both a new medium and one that involves computer use). Thus, it is perceived as a contributor to democracy and equality even though it is not accessible to nearly as many users as are other mass media. Most interestingly, it is people of color, a newly expanding and overwhelmingly young group of new internet users, who most highly value the internet for its educational properties and are most enthusiastic about it for the sake of their children if they have them:

> About 53% of online blacks have a child under the age of 18 at home, while 42% of online whites are parents of children that age. Users often perceive gaining access to the Internet as an investment in the future, and this seems especially true in African-American families. (Spooner & Rainie, 2000, p. A7)

This is also the case for Hispanic families, 49% of whom have a child at home.“Hispanic parents, like other parents, often see the purchase of a computer and internet access as an investment in their children's future” (Spooner & Rainie, 2001, p. B8). I would venture that few Americans of any race would frame television access as an “investment in their children's future”; the language of progress, class mobility, and education is generally lacking in discussions of that medium. Yet as McChesney (1998) noted, the differences between the internet and other popular noninteractive media, such as television, are eroding if not already functionally gone. Thus, families of color are putting their faith in an internet that is coming to resemble less of an “information superhighway” and more of a sprawling suburban shopping mall. It is becoming increasingly clear that

people of color missed the “golden age of cyberculture.”

Despite these critiques, the internet does still retain at least the potential for interactivity that television lacks. Because “the people” are able to add content to the internet, this would seem to qualify it as a form that is popular—or “of the people,” to use Fiske's (1989) formulation—and thus as a possible site of resistance to the majority culture and the mass media that support and promulgate it. Yet this question of “the people” is a vexed one; *which* people are at issue here, and what is their relation to the medium in actual practice as opposed to theory? Until now, questions of race have not much entered the picture when scholars speculate about internet interactivity and its meanings.[2] One of the great contributions that the Pew Foundation has made to the scholarship on race and the internet is its groundbreaking study of Asian Americans, whites, African Americans, and Hispanics that tracks their use of this new medium in more detail than ever before. This allows a more nuanced discussion of who the people online are, what their presence consists of, and the areas in which they are present or absent in specific areas of cyberspace. It also allows for an examination, in more complex terms, of how race matters online.

This chapter examines some differences among racial groups in terms of how they use the internet and briefly examines it as a “popular” medium.[3] The chapter also makes a case for how minority expressive cultures in cyberspace, particularly those produced and consumed by youth of color, may provide sites of resistance to offline racial hegemonies that call for serious consideration.[4]

Race has long been a vexed issue on the internet. In 1996, John Perry Barlow wrote *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* in which he explained,

> Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live. We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.

Race is the very first thing that Barlow (1996) claimed would be eradicated in cyberspace. This implies that of all the body handicaps recognized as oppressive, race is somehow the most oppressive. Barlow's statement was part of the first wave of utopian thinking on the internet; thus, critiquing it is like shooting fish in a barrel.[5] Few people really believe these lyrical claims anymore.[6] However, unlike the original *Declaration of Independence*, Barlow's statement did highlight an intense awareness of race as a problem of access that needs to be overcome. And Barlow was correct in stressing it; data gathered by the Pew Foundation do indicate that there are still significant disparities in access to the internet based on race, with African Americans and Hispanics being *much less likely* to be online than are whites. More than half (58%) of whites have used the internet, compared with 43% of African Americans and 50% of Hispanics (Spooner & Rainie, 2001). Only Asian Americans are more likely to have access; fully 75% of them have used the internet, making them “one of the most wired groups in America” (Spooner, 2001). Furthermore, although the gap in access between people of color and whites is closing, African Americans with access to the internet do not go online as often in a typical day as do whites; only 36% of African Americans go online in a typical day, compared with 56% of whites (Spooner & Rainie, 2000).

Past digital divide discourse has tended to perpetuate the “gap” metaphor, stressing the absence of people of color online and implying that this is a state of things that needs to be remedied.[7] The Pew Foundation's study of internet use and race, which tracks minority participation in four major categories (fun, information seeking, major life activities, and transactions), examines the ways in which all three minority groups studied participate proportionally *more* in several activities. For example, 54% of the African Americans online listened to music online, whereas only 32% of whites online did so. Hispanics and Asian Americans online also listened to music proportionally more than did whites online; nearly half (48%) of Hispanics did so, compared with 46% of Asian Americans. This represents quite a significant digital divide in terms of use of the internet as a means to get access to music, with whites on the “wrong” side despite their superior numbers in terms of general

access to the internet. This divide extends into several different types of activities. The Pew data indicate that when racial minorities get online, more of them spend their time online chatting, sending and reading instant messages, looking for sports information, and downloading music than do whites online. This held true for all three racial non-white racial groups. (This is even more interesting considering how different Asian Americans look in this study in comparison with other racial minority groups; as noted earlier, they are the only non-white group whose members present online in greater numbers than do whites, yet when it comes to "fun" activities, their patterns of internet use resemble those of other minorities across the board much more than they do those of whites.) It seems clear that their investments in the medium are different from those of white users and that they are far more engaged with the internet as a source of expressive or popular culture than as a way to buy or sell stocks, get weather reports, or get hobby information—all activities in which whites online participate proportionally more than do Hispanics, African Americans, or Asian Americans online.

Indeed, the relative absence of people of color in these informational and retail spaces can be read as a healthy divide given the "massification" of the internet by corporations that envision the medium as primarily a way in which to sell products or services.[8] This is not to say that popular culture is not itself a commodity; of course it is—and a very important one in the global economy. However, popular music, movies, and sports all have the distinction of featuring Americans of color on a fairly regular basis, as performers and players if not as owners and producers. Popular musical forms (e.g., hip-hop, rap) and sports (e.g., basketball, football, baseball) provide images of American ethnic minorities as creative, innovative, and powerful.

Significantly, using the internet to access music, movies, sports information, and social functions such as chatting and instant messaging is categorized by the Pew study under the heading of "fun." The titles of the remaining three categories—information seeking, major life activities, and transactions—rhetorically imply that participating in popular culture is not a "major life activity" or a way in which to get important "information." On the contrary, rather than devaluing those online spaces where the small but growing cadre of American minorities are spending their time and energy, a reenvisioning of what constitutes a "major life activity" or salient "information" may be in order. In the case of people of color, popular culture practices constitute a discursive domain where they are more likely to see cultural producers who resemble them. This is important information in the context of the internet and their lived realities. Thus, manifestations of expressive cultures on the internet may provide an online oasis or refuge for users of color, most of whom are relatively young and new to the medium.

In any event, these data confirm the contention of the "Afro-futurists" that, contrary to popular opinion, there is a sizable and culturally significant African diasporic investment in information technologies, including the internet. This would seem to fly in the face of much digital divide discourse. Instead, it appears that users of color are quite selective in their use of the internet and tend to favor activities related to expressive culture, such as music, movies, chatting, and using multimedia sources, over other activities. However, the data do enable a new perspective on what people of color actually do when they are online as opposed to the old focus on the digital divide and information "haves" and "have-nots." Thus, the project is very much in the spirit of the Afro-futurist group that, in a special issue of *Social Text* (Nelson, 2002) and in the collection *Technicolor* (Nelson, 2001), brought to light neglected examples of "African diasporic technophilia" and its long history, debunking the "underlying assumption of much digital divide rhetoric … that people of color, and African Americans in particular, cannot keep pace with our high-tech society" (Nelson, 2002, p. 6).

As stated previously, there are several areas of online life in which people of color participate more fully, in proportion to their numbers, than do whites. African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans generally participate more often in activities coded as "fun"by the Pew study. These activities are as follows:

- Browse just for fun
- Get hobby information
- Send an instant message
- Chat online
- Use video/audio clip
- Play a game

- Look for sports information
- Look for information about music, books, or other leisure activities
- Listen to music
- Download music

As the report noted, this is partly explained by the relative youth of minority groups in comparison with whites. This is especially true of Asian Americans and Hispanics. “The online Hispanic population is very young…. About 61% of online Hispanics are 34 [years old] or under. In comparison, about 37% of white internet users and 54% of African American users are in that cohort” (Spooner & Rainie, 2001). In addition, “The Asian American internet population is also one of the most youthful on the Web. Almost two-thirds (63%) of Asian American users are between the ages of 18 and 34 [years]” (Spooner, 2001). More than half of all people of color who use the internet are young. This has a tremendous bearing on their relation to popular culture because “youth culture” and expressive cultures tend to cross and overlap in numerous ways.

But we must also consider the relation between expressive or popular culture and racial identity and being in the world. Expressive culture practices such as music have always been media spaces where people of color are visible as producers and performers, although of course this should not be read as an unalloyed good. As Gray (1995) wrote,

> Marginalized and subordinated communities have creatively transformed and used popular cultural artifacts such as music, costumes, parades, traditions, and festivals to transgress their particular locations, to express their visions, and [to] invent themselves. What characterizes black youth culture in the 1990s and therefore warrants careful attention is the central role of the commercial culture industry and mass media in the process. (p. 151)

If indeed the internet has become a mass medium and has lost some of its potential as a space for transgression, expression, and reinvention of mass images of race, gender, and identity, this is alarming—but perhaps less so than it seems. Black youth culture is already closely engaged with the commercial culture industry. As Kelley (1997) wrote, “In a nation with few employment opportunities for African Americans and a white consumer market eager to be entertained by the Other, blacks have historically occupied a central place in the popular culture industry” (p. 46).

This partial empowerment in people of color over their own self-representations and imagery in the popular commercial sphere is enacted in multiple media, and the internet is becoming the most recent addition to this process. In some cases, the internet has enabled young people of color to critically intervene in particular aspects of the culture industry such as fashion, another commodi-fied expressive culture with its own set of politics and investments in youth culture. In April 2002, Abercrombie & Fitch, a popular mall retailer that markets its casual clothing to the high school and college set, produced a series of graphic T-shirts that depicted images of Asians with “slanty eyes [and] rice paddy straw hats” along with slogans such as “you love long time” and “two Wongs can make it white.” The latter slogan was paired with an image of two Asian laundry workers. The response to these T-shirts was immediate, and the internet was instrumental in the process. An e-mail campaign was organized both informally (my brother, David K. Nakamura, circulated the protest e-mail to Abercrombie & Fitch that he posted to the *San Jose Mercury News* to a list of more than a dozen recipients that included me—in fact, that was how I learned about the incident) and formally through two Web sites. The first was initiated for the sole purpose of organizing this protest and can be found at http://www.Boycott-af.com. The other can be found at http://www.PetitionOnline.com/bcaf/petition.html. Each provides an area where a user can sign a petition on the Web as well as links to Abercrombie & Fitch's e-mail address and a link that enables a user can send the petition to a friend. Ultimately, this internet organizing resulted in several rallies in front of Abercrombie & Fitch bricks-and-mortar stores, and the Organization of Chinese Americans attributed this to angry complaints, phone calls, and e-mail campaigns that spread quickly among Asian/Pacific Islander students, community members, and leaders nationwide. The Web petition gathered more than 6,500 signatures, and it is impossible to track how many Asian Americans used private e-mail to circulate this information. The T-shirts were withdrawn shortly afterward, and Abercrombie & Fitch delivered an apology to the Asian American community. Here, the internet's ability to spread information “like wildfire” provided

a politicized space that allowed Asian Americans, a minority that struggles against popular images of themselves as hookers and laundry workers, to intervene in the commercial culture industry. In this case, Asian Americans used their status as “the young and the connected” to register their determination not to be represented as slanty-eyed stereotypes. This successful struggle over popular racist imagery by young people of color is notable because of the integral role played by the internet. However, it is yet to be seen whether this protest hurt Abercrombie & Fitch's bottom line.

In addition, although the e-mail campaign against Abercrombie & Fitch's racist T-shirts is encouraging, it is one in which users of color are still constructed as “angry customers” in relation to online commerce. The language of boycott is still that of dissatisfied consumers who use their clout as a “market” to influence retailers' policies. In effect, this is just more of the same; business as usual ported to the internet is only likely to duplicate existing power relations in terms of race and racism. Rigorous scholarship into the distinctions between internet users as consuming audiences and producers of online discourse is crucial to guard against the further reduction of people of color to markets.

I begin to wind things up now by returning to my starting part, that is, the novel idea that it might not be an unmitigated ill for people of color to be absent from the internet. During recent years, only a few cultural critics have been brave enough to buck the trend of internet boosterism, with Fusco (2001) and Hester-Williams (2001) being the most perceptive of these. Their critiques cannot be ignored.[9] Neither espoused a Luddite anti-technological stance; rather, both examined “the price that is exacted for participating in corporate-mediated cyberspaces that take advantage of our search for ‘beloved community’ on the net by reifying and subjecting our identities to the law of the market” (Hester-Williams, 2001). The question, “Does the internet really offer spaces of representation and resistance constructed ‘for us’ and ‘by us’?,” was answered in the negative by Hester-Williams. Fusco's (2001) critique was similar; she noted that the alliance between globalization and the commodification of cyberspace has enabled the “techno-elite's search for a more efficient work-force, which at this point means better trained at the top, less trained at the bottom, and more readily positioned for increased consumption of com-modified leisure” (p. 192). Unlike other critics who see any deployment of minority expressive culture in *any* medium as a form of resistance,[10] Fusco stressed the distinction between commodified leisure and noncommodified leisure.[11] And she was correct in noting that noncommodified spaces are becoming increasingly difficult to find on the internet's particular iteration of hypercapitalism.

Thus, it is crucial that future demographic studies of the internet and race *track production* as well. How many people of color are putting up Web sites; posting their music, images, and videos; managing and contributing to listservs; or adding content to other textual sites? The Pew category “using e-mail” conflates passive e-mail activities, such as reading and deleting porn spam and “tribally marketed” hypercapitalistic advertising, with more active ones, such as writing or even forwarding politically oriented messages on racial identity issues (e.g., Abercrombie & Fitch's “two Wongs can make it white” T-shirts), sending pictures of grandchildren to relatives, and distributing family newsletters.

This is why future studies of internet use in the United States must ask questions regarding people of color as *producers* of internet content, not just as consumers of such content. Tracking the extent to which racial minorities are availing themselves of the internet's interactivity will tell us how much they are adding to the discourse rather than only describing which images, texts, and products they are consuming online—whether they are *being constructed* as markets and credit card holders as opposed to *constructing themselves* as authors, artists, community members, experts, interlocutors, and everyday online people. It is imperative that we devise some rigorous methodologies that help us to understand what constitutes meaningful participation online, that is, participation that opens and broadens the kinds of discourse that can be articulated online. It is not enough to merely “be there”; the figure from old-time online culture of the “lurker” reminds us of the passivity and ghostliness of those who watch from the sidelines of online life.

It may be helpful to envision various *categories* of online citizens rather than thinking in terms of gaps and divides. Just as on airplanes, there are vast tracts of economy-class users on the internet who surf the Web at work and buy quotidian objects online; smaller numbers of business-class users who make Web logs, send

e-mail, and purchase more abstract things (e.g., stocks and bonds) from home; and the exclusive few first-class users who put up fully featured Web pages, know how to avoid spam, and may even work in information technologies. This metaphor of the internet as an airline may be useful because it dodges the problematics of the binary digital divide by envisioning internet use as subject to several gradations and because it also places the medium within a matrix that more closely resembles the global capitalistic environment of which the internet is both a symptom and an initiating force. These “classes” of service cut across race in interesting ways. Latinos and African Americans are overwhelmingly in economy class but, unfortunately, have the most faith in the airline. And although Asian Americans are in all classes and occupy more of the seats proportionally given their numbers, it is not possible to tell from the data provided by the Pew study whether they are content producers.

New media at their best have always challenged the distinction between producers and consumers, hence their appeal to postmodernist theorists, who proposed several decades ago that the right kinds of literature accomplished the same thing.[12] The hope for Hester-Williams's (2001) ideal “beloved communities” of color on the internet is just beginning to take hold in the vital, lively, and diverse expressive popular cultures and playspaces of chatting, gaming, and music that are *already* drawing users of color. It may also be significant in this context that African Americans are much more likely to use the internet to “seek religious information,” an activity that the Pew study characterized as “information seeking.” This difference is quite striking; fully one third (33%) of African Americans use the internet as a spiritual medium, whereas only 20% of whites do so. Perhaps the internet is functioning as a potential space for *religious* beloved community in a way that might be compared to African American churches, which have long been a nexus of ethnic community and human connection.

In any event, it seems that the current story of race online is more complex than had been thought. Simplistic notions of the digital divide do not obtain when we examine the decisive role of popular and expressive cultures in the growing minority presence online. The challenge now is to ensure that these new members of online culture are upgraded to higher classes of service and that they not remain in the steerage class of online lurkers and consumers. The internet's increasingly corporate culture works incessantly to turn us all into markets, and the greatest challenge of race in cyberspace is to resist this downgrading of what we are and what we can become.

Notes

1. See the extensive literature on the topic of racial stereotyping and media, particularly television, such as Gray's (1995) *Watching* “*Race*,” Hamamoto's (1994) *Monitored Peril*, Morrison's (1993) *Playing in the Dark*, Noriega's (2000) *Shot in America*.

2. See in particular works by Nelson (2001, 2002), Hester-Williams (2001), Fusco (2001), and Foster (1999, 2000) for some exceptions to this rule.

3. This needs to be addressed more fully in cyberculture scholarship. See McLaine's (2003) essay, “Ethnic Online Communities.”

4. See Poster's (2001) *What's the Matter With the Internet?* for a nuanced critical theory approach that identifies and analyzes sites of resistance on the internet.

5. See Silver's (2000) formulation of the three stages of internet scholarship in his essay published in *Web.Studies*. He described these stages as “popular cyberculture” (characterized by a journalist bent and utopian tone), “cyberculture studies,” and “critical cyberculture studies.” Barlow's (1996) proclamation belongs to the first group.

6. See the extensive literature recently published on the digital divide, including Compaine's (2001) collection from MIT Press titled *The Digital Divide: Facing a Crisis or Creating a Myth?* This collection contains two of

the most widely influential social science studies of the digital divide: Hoffman and Novak's “The Evolution of the Digital Divide: Examining the Relationship of Race to Internet Access and Usage Over Time” and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's study titled “Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide.” For cultural and media studies approaches to digital divide issues, see also *Race in Cyberspace* (Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000), *Technicolor* (Nelson, 2001), *Cybertypes* (Nakamura, 2002), and Foster's work on cyberculture, in particular “The Souls of Cyber-folk” (Foster, 1999) and “Trapped by the Body?” (Foster, 2000).

7. See Warschauer's (n.d.) “Reconceptualizing the Digital Divide” for a further critique of this concept. Warschauer's article argues,“The concept provides a poor framework for either analysis or policy and suggests an alternate concept of technology for social inclusion.”

8. In *Dark Fiber*, Internet critic Geert Lovink identified three “phases” of the internet: the first one dominated by military and scientific uses of the network; the second one, or the “golden age of cyberculture,” with its “mixture of yuppies and hippies, characterized by an individualistic anti-state attitude”; and the third and current one, defined by “the coming of the online masses” or massification (Lovink, 2002, p. 137).

9. Alkalimat (2001) presented an entirely different perspective. He is the founder and promoter of “eBlack,” described in his article of the same name as the technological successor to black studies. Its manifesto reads that “eBlack, the virtualization of the Black experience, is the basis for the next stage of our academic discipline,” and that “eBlack depends upon everyone having access to and becoming active users of cybertechnology.” But Alkalimat is not at all interested in black expressive culture on the internet despite the fact that this is how most people of color online are using it. He affirmed that the internet must be used for educational purposes and that that is where its value lies. In this way, Alkalimat is a classic digital dividist, meaning that he has an unreflectively positive opinion of the internet's “educational” value to people of color.

10. See Kelley (1997) and Rose (1994) on hip-hop music for a discussion of this dynamic. See also Gilroy's (2000) *Against Race*.

11. Needless to say, this is the holy grail of cultural studies scholars, from Dick Hebdige onward. See Hebdige's (1981) *Subculture* for an illustration of this. Kelley (1997) provided a brilliant discussion of the complicated relation between the popular culture and its commodification in *Yo Mama's DysFUNKtional!*

12. See Barthes's (1991) *S/Z* for a definition of the readerly (or passive text) and the writerly (or active text). The postmodern is characterized by the latter, but his point is that any text can be read in a writerly or active fashion. See Landow's (1997) *Hypertext 2.0* for a postmodern affirmation of hypertext's potential as a revolutionary medium.

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- cyberculture
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