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# Race and racism in Internet Studies: A review and critique

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## Abstract

Race and racism persist online in ways that are both new and unique to the Internet, alongside vestiges of centuries-old forms that reverberate significantly both offline and on. As we mark 15 years into the field of Internet studies, it becomes necessary to assess what the extant research tells us about race and racism. This paper provides an analysis of the literature on race and racism in Internet studies in the broad areas of (1) race and the structure of the Internet, (2) race and racism matters in what we do online, and (3) race, social control and Internet law. Then, drawing on a range of theoretical perspectives, including Hall's spectacle of the Other and DuBois's view of white culture, the paper offers an analysis and critique of the field, in particular the use of *racial formation theory*. Finally, the paper points to the need for a critical understanding of whiteness in Internet studies.

## Keywords

DuBois, Internet, race, racial formation theory, racism, review, whiteness, white racial frame

## Introduction

During the early days of the Internet, some scholars theorized that the emergence of virtual environments and a culture of fantasy would mean an escape from the boundaries of race and the experience of racism. A few imagined a rise in *identity tourism*, that is, people using the playful possibilities of gaming to visit different racial and gender identities online (Nakamura, 2002; Turkle, 1997). There were early edited volumes that suggested race and racism would be foundational to Internet studies (e.g., Kolko et al.,

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2000; Nelson et al., 2000). Yet, the reality that emerged is quite different from either of these initial imaginings. The Internet has not provided an escape route from either race or racism, nor has the study of race or racism proven to be central to the field of Internet studies. Instead, race and racism persist online in ways that are both new and unique to the Internet, alongside vestiges of centuries-old forms that reverberate both offline and on. As we mark 15 years into the field of Internet studies, it becomes necessary to assess what the extant research tells us about race and racism. In this paper, I provide an analysis of the literature on race and racism in Internet studies in the broad areas of (1) race and the structure of the Internet, (2) race and racism matters in what we do online, and (3) race, social control and Internet law. Then, drawing on a range of theoretical perspectives, including Hall's spectacle of the Other (1997) and Du Bois's view of white culture (2003/1920), I offer an analysis and critique of the field, in particular the use of *racial formation theory*. Finally, I point to the need for a critical understanding of whiteness and the white racial frame in Internet studies.

## Race and structure of the Internet

The Internet was developed in specific geographic places, institutional contexts and historical moments that helped shaped the technological innovations known as 'the web' (Berners-Lee and Fischetti, 2008). While tracing those narratives is beyond the scope of this paper, an examination of the ways that race was, and continues to be, implicated in the structure of the Internet is relevant.

### *Infrastructure and design*

The role of race in the development of Internet infrastructure and design has largely been obscured (Taborn, 2008). As Sinclair observes, 'The history of race in America has been written as if technologies scarcely existed, and the history of technology as if it were utterly innocent of racial significance' (Sinclair, 2004: 1). Yet, race is implicated in the very structure of the 'graphic user interface' (GUI). For example, Everett observes that she is perpetually taken aback by DOS-commands designating a 'Master Disk' and 'Slave Disk,' a programming language predicated upon a digitally configured 'master/slave' relationship with all the racial meanings coded into the hierarchy of command lines (2002: 125). Nakamura writes about drop-down menus and clickable boxes that are used to categorically define 'race' online, tracing them back to race as a key marketing category (Nakamura, 2002). Beyond selection and targeted marketing via race, elements of the interface are racialized. The nearly ubiquitous white hand-pointer acts as a kind of avatar that in turn becomes 'attached' to depictions of white people in advertisements, graphical communication settings and web greeting cards (White, 2006). The images of racial or ethnic minorities and their relationship to IT infrastructure and design are either as consumers or operators of the technological wizardry created by whites (Kevorkian, 2006; Taborn, 2008). Assumptions about the whiteness embedded in the infrastructure and design get spoken when there are ruptures in that sameness, such as the introduction of an African-American-themed web browser, *Blackbird*, in 2008. While *Blackbird* caused quite a stir among those who had operated on the assumption of a race-blind

Internet,<sup>1</sup> the development of a racially themed browser is not qualitatively different from, but rather an extension of, the racially targeted marketing facilitated by drop-down menus and clickable boxes.

## *Industry*

Race is built into the Internet industry. Many of the technological advances originally developed that gave rise to the Internet and Internet studies were created in Northern California, much of it in and around Palo Alto Research Center (PARC). Those technological innovations made possible the rise in a new industrial sector centered in the Santa Clara Valley area dubbed 'Silicon Valley.' Scholars working in this area note that while the industry and the Valley touts itself as 'diverse' in web advertisements, the reality is much different (Pitti, 2004). The industry, like the region, carried with it the inequalities of race, class and gender of the social context. The tech firms in Silicon Valley are predominantly led by white men and a few white women, yet the manual labor of cleaning their offices and assembling circuit boards is done by immigrants and outsourced labor, often women living in the global south (Gajjala, 2004; Hossfeld, 2001; Pitti, 2004; Shih, 2006). These inequalities are often also resisted in important ways by and through networks based on race, class and gender. Shih's work, for example, comparing the work experiences of immigrant Asian men and women to native-born white women in the hi-tech industry of Silicon Valley suggests that racial/ethnic *and* gender bias are actually ameliorated by the fact that highly skilled workers cultivate gender-based and ethnic-based networks as resources that enable them to circumvent bias (Shih, 2006: 200).

## *Digital divides and mobile technology*

Early in Internet studies, race was identified as an important variable for predicting access and use of computers. In an initial study conducted by the Census Bureau under the direction of the US National Telecommunications and Information Administration, African-Americans were found to have lower rates than whites in both computer equipment ownership and telephone service (NTIA, 1995). This finding was highly publicized and quickly became known as 'the digital divide,' and launched a subfield of research within Internet studies relating to race. The initial focus on computer ownership shifted in subsequent versions of the study to Internet access (NTIA, 1999). Now, these initial divides in ownership and access have largely converged (Leggon, 2006). Researchers subsequently identified 'second-level divides' that focused on the relationship between skills and Internet usage (Hargittai, 2002, 2012; Lenhart and Horrigan, 2003). Selwyn (2004) contends that digital divide formulations rely on the assumption that Internet access and usage is desirable and beneficial for everyone when, in fact, people might not be using the Internet because there is no perceived social benefit in doing so. Brock (2006b) extends this argument to explain racial disparities and argues that the paucity of Internet content relevant to Black interests may have more to do with the slower Internet adoption rates than with current formulations of technological illiteracy. Much has changed since the mid-1990s when 'digital divide' research began and

computer ownership and Internet access meant sitting before a desktop machine with a wire plugged into a wall (Warschauer, 2003).

As Rheingold (2002) accurately predicted, the 'next social revolution' in computing would be the advent of mobile technologies, and this development has had important implications for race, racism and Internet studies. Mobile phones enabled with Internet access are approaching ubiquity and, with that, bridging some of the divides noted in an earlier era. According to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, cell phone and wireless laptop Internet use each grew more prevalent between 2009 and 2010, and African-Americans and English-speaking Latinos continue to be among the most active users of the mobile web. Cell phone ownership is higher among African-Americans and Latinos than among whites (87% versus 80%) and minority cell phone owners take advantage of a much greater range of their phones' features compared with white mobile phone users. In total, 64% of African-Americans access the Internet from a laptop or mobile phone, a seven-point increase from the 57% who did so at a similar point in 2009.<sup>2</sup> Along with these trends toward convergence, there are both hopeful and troubling aspects of collective action centered on how race and racism became implicated in these technologies (more about this below).

## Race and racism matter in what we do online

Sassen (2002) has noted the way that the digital and the material are imbricated, that is, the way they overlap significantly rather than exist in distinct, disparate realms. While acknowledging these imbrications, my focus in the following section is on the digital and the ways that race and racism matter in what we do online.

### *Identity and community*

Several works early on in Internet studies pushed identity and community to the top of the research agenda. Howard Rheingold's *Virtual Community* (1993) captured the imagination of a broad audience and influenced a generation of scholars, such as those in Smith and Kollock's edited *Communities in Cyberspace* (1999). Two volumes published in the late 1990s highlighted the importance of identity, Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of Internet* (1997) and Manuel Castells in *The Power of Identity*, the second volume of his pioneering *The Information Age* trilogy (1997). Although neither Rheingold nor Turkle explicitly address race,<sup>3</sup> Castells devotes a portion of the second volume to a discussion of race and ethnicity (1997: 84–97). Since then, a growing body of research points to the fact that people seek out racial identity and community online. People use the Internet to both form and reaffirm individual racial identity and seek out communities based on race and racial understandings of the world (Byrne, 2008a, 2008b; Everett, 2004, 2008; Nakamura and Chow-White, 2011). Castells notes that there is a constant struggle between globalization and identity (1997: 1). This tension plays out in the global connectedness the web facilitates, which simultaneously scaffolds identity and community within and among multiple diasporas that are a result, at least in part, of the forces of globalization (Gajjala, 2004; Ignacio, 2006; Mitra, 2010).

As people move across national boundaries due to shifting capital flows and changing state regulations, online spaces of connection based on racial and ethnic identity become increasingly important mechanisms for sustaining imagined communities (Bernal, 2006). Diasporas within national borders are also sustained through the Internet (Eglash, 2001), as when the web became a vital tool for connecting African-Americans following Hurricane Katrina (Brock, 2008). In some ways, the Internet functions as a kind of third space that encourages intimate discursive interaction, similar to the way Black barber shops and beauty salons allowed private spaces for identity discourses between Black men and women, and also opens these formerly private spaces to non-Blacks, who contribute to the articulation of Black identity online (Brock, 2009; Hughey, 2008). Whites, too, create and join online spaces in search of community predicated on racial identity (McPherson, 2000, 2003), some with overtly racist political agendas (Adams and Roscigno, 2005; Atton, 2006; Daniels, 2008b, 2009a; Back, 2002; Bostdorff, 2004; Breckheimer, 2002; Burris et al., 2000; Campbell, 2006; Zickmund, 1997).

The prevailing view in the field is that the Internet is a site for identity construction and community formation around racial and ethnic identity (Ignacio, 2005; Nakamura and Chow-White, 2011; Parker and Song, 2006). Although some scholars envision the Internet as an escape route from race and racial embodiment (e.g., Hansen, 2006), this view relies on a text-only web that no longer exists. The evidence for this shift appears in Nakamura's work in which she examines the 'text-only niche Internet,' where identity tourism, that is, the escape from visibly embodied racial identity, was more possible (Nakamura, 2002). While acknowledging the possibility of escaping racial identity through disembodied text, she still points to the persistence of race online. In more recent work (Nakamura, 2008), she traces the shift to the current popular Internet culture that relies heavily on visual images that mediate racial identity formation. The central concern of her most recent project is with visual culture as a way to parse racial and ethnic identity in digital technologies and practices (2008: 12). To explore this, Nakamura examines a wide range of examples in which people visually represent themselves on the Internet through such commonplace artifacts as the avatar. The key insight here for race and Internet studies is that rather than offer an escape route out of notions of race tied to embodiment, the visual culture of the Internet complicates race and racism in new ways that are still closely tied to a politics of representation with ties to colonialism.

## Gaming

Literally millions of people are playing online games, and meeting in person at gaming conferences. In 2009, according to the National Public Diary Group (NPD Group), there were an estimated 169.9 million people playing video games in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Despite these millions of gamers, we are still at the beginning of understanding how race and racism operate in these virtual worlds. Kendall's nuanced *Hanging out in the Virtual Pub* (2002) looks at the reproduction of race and gender in one of these game spaces that she calls *BlueSky*, and finds that it privileges a particular form of white masculinity. She writes:

The masculinities performed on *BlueSky* demonstrate the convergence and interaction of several important facets of identity, including class, gender, sexuality, race, age, and relationships to technology. .... The predominance of white men online can ... limit the inclusiveness to 'others' who can fit themselves into a culture for by and for those white men. (Kendall, 2000: 271–272)

Williams et al. (2009) confirm this research in their analysis, arguing that white males are systematically over-represented in video games. Thomas (2008) notes that games such as *Lineage* and *Lineage II* have produced heated conflicts over race, nationality and play-styles, and that *World of Warcraft* has responded to player complaints of Chinese players' 'gold farming' by banning hundreds of thousands of accounts from the game. He points to issues of power, privilege and investment as markers of race in cyberspace, and argues that these issues are manifested in strategies of denial and disavowal, rather than explicit racism (2008: 172). Leonard (2003, 2006, 2009) writes persuasively about video games as offering players explorations of black athleticism and the inner city. Video games are not just games, Leonard argues, but spaces to 'engage American discourses, ideologies, and racial dynamics' (Leonard, 2003: 3). Leonard also makes the important point that the dominant narratives about 'violence' in video games, and the impact this has on imagined white youth, obfuscates their role in legitimating state-sponsored violence against Black and Brown people depicted in the games (Leonard, 2006, 2009). Daniels and Lalone (2012), in their analysis of the contradictory and overlapping qualities of overt racism (e.g., *Border Patrol*) and the more subtle racism in popular video games (e.g., the 'Leeroy Jenkins' meme in *World of Warcraft*), note the paradoxical, contradictory nature of racism that characterizes the current historical moment in which different forms exist alongside one another. The difficulty in calling out racism in the context of the popular Internet in which 'racist grieving' is part of gaming culture is particularly vexing (Nakamura, 2009). The emerging research on race and racism in gaming suggests that these have not disappeared, but rather that they have been altered in significant ways online.

### *Online fandom and popular culture*

Within Internet studies, there was fairly early research about the importance of gender in online fandom (e.g., Baym, 1999), but to date, there has been relatively little attention to race or racism in the area of fan studies (Jenkins interview with Gatson, 2008).<sup>5</sup> The research that has been done points to the salience of race and racism in online fandom. For example, Bernardi (1998) observes that fans of the television show *Star Trek* discuss race at almost every opportunity in his study of the STREK-L listserv. Bernardi goes on to argue that while fans of the show are willing to engage in the possibility that the racial status quo may be shifting, they are mired in old forms of racism that rely on biologically reductive notions of race that ultimately lead to discussions of 'reverse discrimination' and reaffirm whiteness (Bernardi, 1998: 180). Darling-Wolf (2004) charts the formation of a cross-cultural, trans-Asian identity formed across 14 countries among fans of the Japanese celebrity Kimura Takuya. More recently, Sperb (2010) explores Internet fan activity around Disney's notorious *Song of the South* (1946), so offensive in its racial stereotyping that the company stopped releasing it to American audiences in 1986.



However, through the circulation of bootleg copies and various forms of Internet discourse, online fans have kept *Song of the South* in public consciousness. Fans describe their affectionate longing for the film, while resisting any suggestions that it is racist, hoping the presence of online fan support will force Disney to finally release it on DVD. In two variations on fan studies, Hughey (2010), examining film critics' reviews of 'white savior films,' and Brock (2009), analyzing 'thugs' and blog commenters responding to *The Wire* (at the behest of a sociologist and a major news site), both explore the racial implications of audience reception online. Taken together, the nascent research about online fandom suggests that these activities are imbued with race and racism.

### *Online news and sports*

Reading newspapers is, as Benedict Anderson (1991) observed, one of the chief ways that people imagine themselves part of a community. This has not changed as the news has moved online (Riley et al., 1998). There is some research using narrative or discourse analysis to examine racism and stereotypes in news sources (Meyers, 2004; Teo, 2000) and sports (Harrison et al., 2010), but these do not address the interactive feature of online news. As online news has opened up the range of sources available, some research has pointed to a connection between racial bias and news reading online, suggesting that those who read and believe non-mainstream sources of news (e.g., World News Daily) have higher levels of racism (Melican and Dixon, 2008). Following on Anderson's concept of imagined communities, online news sites are an important venue for creating racial meanings (Brock, 2009).

Online arms of newspapers, news magazines, television and radio news stations sometimes invite commentary from readers and listeners from the general public, and this has prompted an emergent arena of research into online news consumption (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2010). This has had unintended consequences in terms of racism. Around 2004, the online arms of many US newspapers opened their websites for comments. Today, some seven years into this experiment, many news sites have abandoned the practice of allowing comments because of offensive comments.<sup>6</sup> The explicitly racist comments online suggest that the Internet allows for the acting out of what Sharpe calls 'nonconsensual racial fantasies' (Sharpe, 1999: 1094). The presence, indeed the preponderance, of racist comments in the public sphere highlight a problem that Howard Rheingold has referred to as a 'classic tragedy of the commons dilemma' in which 'flamers, bullies, bigots, charlatans, know-nothings and nuts in online discourse take advantage of open access to other people's attention' (Rheingold, 2002: 121). Thus far, only one study has systematically examined the way comments at online forums of news sites foster and reproduce racism (Steinfeldt et al., 2010). In their study of over 1000 posts related to University of North Dakota's *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo used for their athletic team, Steinfeldt and colleagues found that a critical mass of online forum comments represented disdain toward American Indians by providing misinformation, perpetuating stereotypes and expressing overtly racist attitudes toward Native Americans. The researchers explained their findings through the framework of two-faced racism (Picca and Feagin, 2007). Drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical theory of the presentation of 'front stage' and 'back stage' performances of the self, Picca and Feagin



developed the concept of two-faced racism to explain the hundreds of thousands of diary entries from white college students in which they document how whites perform tolerance in public, mixed-race settings and explicit racism in private, white-only spaces. This conceptualization of two-faced racism may be especially useful for explaining the tragedy of the commons dilemma created by racism in online comments and the blurring of public and private on the Internet (Daniels and Hughey, 2012).

### *Social networking sites*

Social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook and MySpace, are phenomenally popular and important to the field of Internet studies (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). SNSs are also a place where race and racism play out in interesting, sometimes disturbing, ways. From 2005 to 2009, Watkins (2009) explored the movement of young people, aged 15–24, from MySpace to Facebook (97). Watkins found that the same racialized language used to differentiate between safe and unsafe people and communities was used to describe Facebook and MySpace. The participants in his study described MySpace as ‘uneducated, trashy, ghetto, crowded, and [filled with] predators,’ while they described Facebook as ‘selective, clean, educated, and trustworthy’ (80, 83). This is consistent with boyd’s (2012) ethnographic research in which she notes the ‘white flight’ from MySpace to Facebook among young people. Watkins (2009) theorizes that the students associate MySpace with the uneducated and unemployed, while Facebook’s uniformity conveys upward mobility and professionalism. Watkins observes that ‘the young people surveyed and spoke with are attracted to online communities that connect them to people who are like them in some notable way,’ most notably race (97). Quantitative analysis of friendship networks among a sample of college students who posted pictures of themselves ( $N = 736$ ) on Facebook suggests that friend selection is not solely attributable to race, but complicated by other variables, such as ethnicity, region and membership in elite institutions (Wimmer and Lewis, 2010).

Grasmuck et al. (2009) take a different approach to race and SNSs and explore the racial themes associated with injustice frequently included by the African-American, Latino and Indian students on their Facebook wall. They theorize that these wall postings convey a sense of group belonging, color consciousness and identification with groups historically stigmatized by dominant society. In contrast, the profiles of white students and Vietnamese students rarely signaled group identification or racial themes, reflecting ‘strategies of racelessness.’

Research by Tynes and Markoe (2010) examines how young people negotiate racism within SNSs. They look at associations between responses to online expressions of racism and color-blind racial attitudes. Tynes and Markoe operationalize racism by using photos of racially themed parties (e.g., blackface or ‘ghetto’ themes) and asking study participants to respond. They showed 217 African-American and white college students images and prompted them to respond as if they were writing on a friend’s ‘wall’ on Facebook or MySpace. The researchers also measured self-reported racial color blindness. Their findings indicate that those who scored lower in color blindness were more vocal in their opposition to the images and were more likely to say that they would ‘defriend’ someone who engaged in the practice. White participants and those who

scored high in racial color blindness were more likely to be in the 'not bothered' reaction group. Further, these students were more likely to condone and even encourage the racial theme party practice by laughing at the photos and affirming the partygoers. Although both studies use small samples, Grasmuck et al.'s work, along with Tynes and Markoe's research, moves the field of race and Internet studies a step beyond which social networks people join and why, to how race (and racism) shapes what they do once in those networks.

### *Blogging*

Scholars writing about the blogging have observed the transformation of blogs from marginal to mainstream (Perlmutter, 2008). Karlsson investigates a small sample of Asian-American bloggers, explores the ways that these blogs foster diasporic connections and finds that they are above all shaped by the real and imagined audience of fellow Asian-American diary bloggers (Karlsson, 2006). Research by Pole (2009) examines how African-American and Latino political bloggers use their blogs to encourage civic engagement in politics. Brock explores African-American bloggers' response to mainstream news reports about Hurricane Katrina (2008). Kvasny and Igwe (2008) look at how aspects of African-American identity are performed discursively in a blog community centered around HIV/AIDS in the black community.

There is also research that examines bloggers writing outside the US. Somolu (2007) writes about African women bloggers 'telling their own stories' in ways that offer pathways to social change. Using media ethnography and qualitative content analysis of language, symbols and cultural influences to examine blogging among queer South Asian bloggers, Mitra and Gajjala identify themes related to how power is shifted and relayed through the interactional features of blog writing and commenting (Mitra and Gajjala, 2008). The authors find that while these blog communities allow for certain kinds of self-expression not available offline, they shape their performance of sexuality in these spaces (Mitra, 2010; Mitra and Gajjala, 2008). Set against this research and examined as a whole, the whiteness (not to mention, US-centric quality) of the blogosphere is notable but not often examined within Internet studies.

### *Health and science*

Internet users increasingly look for health information online. Race and racism are implicated here, both in who looks for health information and support online, as well as in the democratizing influence of the Internet on how scientific knowledge is mediated.

Health information seeking online reflects the general patterns of health disparities. Within the US, whites as a population have better health outcomes and are better served by the health care system: they are also more likely to seek health information online. However, this does not tell the whole story. Dutta, Bodie and Basu (2008) find that African America and Latino young people are using health websites to educate themselves about communicable diseases, teen pregnancy and sexuality matters, along with other health and medical information. Beyond health information seeking, research has demonstrated that disease-specific online support can have benefits. Fogel and

colleagues (2003) investigated the potential psychological benefits of Internet use among 180 white, African-American and Hispanic American breast cancer patients. Using standardized psychological measures, they found that Internet use among minorities was associated with greater overall appraisal and tangible social support. Other research has found that online spaces that are both focused on a particular health issue (e.g., HIV/AIDS) and racially specific can function as important alternative spaces for support, networking and discussion (Kvasny and Igwe, 2008). The value of these kinds of alternative online spaces to address race and racism should not be underestimated in the context of racism and color-blind ideology within US health care (Malat et al., 2010) and the damaging health effects linked to racism (Geronimus, 1992; Williams and Collins, 2001).

The Internet has changed the dissemination of scientific knowledge and this has implications for the way race and science are mediated online. For example, Nelson and Hwang's research (2011) explores the proliferation of YouTube videos by genetic genealogists. African-American genealogists in the Internet era are enabled by developments such as Google's personal genomics company *23andMe*, which sells consumers genetic inferences about their 'health, disease and ancestry,' with a social networking component (Nelson and Hwang, 2012). In the videos, people reveal and react to results of their DNA testing in 'roots revelations' and viewers respond to the videos. Nelson and Hwang theorize that these roots revelations, and the call-and-response that follows, are premised on a type of racial sincerity in which identities are drawn not only from genetic ancestry results, but also from the networked interaction between broadcasters and their audiences. In this instance, YouTube facilitates root-seekers' association with others from a new genetic community.

### *Propaganda and epistemology*

The Internet is a site of political struggle over racial meaning, knowledge and values. Epistemology, or how we know what we say we know, is changing in the Internet era (Daniels, 2009a). Concepts that once may have seemed to be an agreed-upon cultural value, such as 'racial equality' or 'diversity,' are now fought over online in ways previously unimagined as white supremacist groups urge members to edit Wikipedia pages while progressive anti-racists try and counter these efforts with their own edits. At the same time, propaganda is changing online. For example, *MartinLutherKing.org* appears to be a tribute site, but is in fact owned by a white supremacist (Daniels, 2009b). Cloaked websites like this, which disguise authorship in order to disguise a political agenda, are often inflected with racial meanings. Although the graphic design of the MLK site makes it easy to spot as problematic for the savvy user, some novice web users can be confused by it (Daniels, 2008a). There are much more sophisticated examples of cloaked sites that raise further concerns about race, propaganda and epistemology. For example, the 'California Latino Water Coalition,' appears to be a grassroots organizing effort to stop the corporate control of the water supply, but it is in fact a front group for agribusiness. A casual web user would never know this from the URL *LatinoWater.com*, without a visit to an additional site such as *SourceWatch*. The presence of intentionally racialized propaganda online presents new challenges for

understanding race and racism in the constantly contested political terrain of the popular Internet.

### *Social movements and collective action*

Social movements are organized collective action toward a specific social goal and, within Internet studies, there is a growing literature that looks at social movements online (Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Langman, 2005) and the relationship between online and offline activism (Brunsting and Postmes, 2002). A growing body of research is beginning to look at social movements online that are organized around racially progressive goals. For example, when six young African-American high school students in Jena, LA, were arrested for fighting on school grounds, and their white counterparts only received school-based punishment, many around the US were outraged. The young men who were arrested quickly became known as 'the Jena 6' and a network of concerned citizens, primarily through young African-Americans active online, mobilized others in an effort to get the Jena 6 released (Greenlea, 2011; Kvasny et al., 2009). Rapp and colleagues document the explicitly black feminist organizing online that took place following a sexual assault at the Dunbar Village housing project in Florida (Rapp et al., 2010). Some of this work takes a different approach and looks at racially regressive political groups such as neo-Nazis and the KKK (Adams and Roscigno, 2005; Atton, 2006; Back, 2002; Bostdorff, 2004; Burris et al., 2000; Campbell, 2006; Glaser et al., 2002; Lee and Leets, 2002; Leets, 2001; Tateo, 2005; Zickmund, 1997). A recent systematic look at social movement discourse across multiple racist organization examined movement discourse pre- and post-Internet to explore how such groups had, or had not, made the transition to the digital era (Daniels, 2009a). The findings of this research are mixed but suggest that old forms of racism have moved onto the Internet and exist alongside newer forms, such as cloaked websites that seek to disguise racist propaganda. The threat here, the author argues, is less one of potential recruitment to social movement organizations (although that is possible), but rather the shifting epistemological ground on which politically hard-won ideals of racial equality are based.

Collective action may overlap with social movement organizations; however, it is important to distinguish the two. Collective action lacks a clearly defined social goal, whereas movement organizations are trying to affect social change (e.g., think 'flash mob' versus the 'Jena 6 protest'). Goggin (2008) has shown a number of ways in which mobile technologies, collective action and racial meanings are interwoven in the social and political milieu of the Australian context. Goggin demonstrates that dominant narratives, images and features of mobile use construct mobile phone culture as a particular articulation of whiteness (2008: 177). Perhaps most troubling is the incident at Cronulla, a southern suburb of Sydney, in December 2005, when approximately 5000 residents used SMS technology to organize a rally to protest the incursion onto their beaches of aggressive men of 'Middle Eastern appearance' intimidating 'white' female beachgoers. The protest turned into violent riot, with numerous assaults on people perceived to be Middle Eastern (Goggin, 2008: 179–180). Even before the riot at Cronulla, Australia had been at the forefront of thinking about legal remedies for racism facilitated via the Internet and mobile technologies.

## Race, social control and Internet law

Law is an important, but by no means exclusive, mechanism of social control. Increasingly, we live in a surveillance culture that is made possible in large measure by Internet technology. In the following section, I take up the connections between race and Internet studies as it relates to social control and the law.

### *Surveillance culture and social control*

Browne (2010) writes about some of these surveillance technologies as they relate to border crossings, and there are implications of this surveillance culture for understanding race and the Internet. Duster (2012) observes that in the last decade, state and national DNA databases have expanded exponentially, and the US has now collected more than six million samples. Both the federal government and several states have begun collecting DNA from those arrested for misdemeanors. While both Brown and Duster applaud the use of DNA when this represents a 'technology of hope,' such as when those who are wrongly convicted are released from incarceration, but both encourage skepticism about the liberatory potential of DNA within the context of a surveillance culture. Duster questions how long it will be before DNA data is part of the information that is searchable online by the general public. This has especially dire consequences for young black and brown men who are most often the target of the system one scholar refers to as 'the New Jim Crow' (Alexander, 2012).

### *Haven for hate speech*

The French government sued *Yahoo!* Inc. for violating French laws about hate speech by selling Nazi memorabilia through its online auction site. After years of resistance on the part of *Yahoo!* Executives, citing First Amendment protection and the 'impossibility' of enforcing such laws across national boundaries, the French eventually won and *Yahoo!* finally removed the offensive material (Daniels, 2009a; Goldsmith and Wu, 2006). This case illustrates a key feature of international debates surrounding the racist hate speech. In the US, cyberlibertarians (Godwin, 1998) view the Internet and regulation as antithetical to principles of the US constitution that they interpret as guaranteeing an absolute right to free speech, regardless of content (Becker et al., 2000). This view holds that racist speech online is a trivial concern compared to the regulation of racist speech online, which is viewed as a more serious threat. The European model adopts a human rights framework that values free speech as a fundamental right, but conceptualizes the need to balancing that right against the important human right of being free from discrimination or harassment based on race (Hicks et al., 2000). Critical race theorists within the US are critical of the absolutist view of free speech (Matsuda et al., 1993), and a few scholars have made the case for an interpretation of the First Amendment that recognizes the harm in hate speech (Daniels, 2009a; Smith, 2002). For the most part, however, the view put forward by critical race theorists is not widely held in the US and is more readily embraced in Europe. As a number of legal scholars have pointed out, this disjuncture between a European human rights framework and the absolutist US framework

effectively sets up a haven for hate speech, as what is illegal in Europe is most likely accepted in the states (Breckheimer, 2002; Savelsberg and King, 2005; Van Blaricum, 2005).

## Analysis

### *The spectacle of the other*

Stuart Hall writes that when there are gross inequalities of power, these inequities are sustained by ‘the spectacle of the Other,’ that is gazing at representations of racialized others. Hall goes on to explain that this facilitates a binding together of ‘all of Us who are “normal” into one “imagined community”’; and it sends into symbolic exile all of Them – The Others – who are in some way different – beyond the pale’ (Hall, 1997: 258). Race in Internet studies has not escaped this gaze. In April 2002, Henry Jenkins published ‘Cyberspace and Race’ in MIT’s *Technology Review*, in which he observed:

Like many white liberals, I had viewed the absence of explicit racial markers in cyberspace with some optimism - seeing the emerging ‘virtual communities’ as perhaps our best hope ever of achieving a truly color-blind society. But many of the forum’s minority participants-both panelists and audience members-didn’t experience cyberspace as a place where nobody cared about race. (Jenkins, 2002)

The dynamic Jenkins describes is one that has played out in the field of Internet studies with regard to race. For the most part, the burden of noticing race on the Internet has been left to ‘minority participants,’ that is, to researchers who are people of color. The ‘spectacle of the Other’ has had profound implications on the field of race and Internet studies in two ways: (1) race as a ‘variable’ and (2) race as ‘identity.’

Zuberi (2001) deconstructs the logic behind the use of race as a variable in quantitative social science. He argues that race has been misused as a causal variable. Separated from social context, race as a discrete cause of some social phenomenon is problematic because it conflates correlation with causality (Zuberi, 2001: 97). Race used as a causal variable without reference to context somewhat inevitably leads to a deficit model in which those ‘with race’ (those who are not white) are perpetually found lacking (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Within Internet studies, this is most evident in research on the digital divide, in which most digital divide rhetoric depicts a world where ‘undereducated, undermotivated and underemployed minorities are competing against technologically sophisticated whites’ (Jenkins, 2002).<sup>7</sup> This view is what Everett refers to a ‘master narrative’ that positions ‘black people in general, and black women especially, as casualties of the information economy’ (Everett, 2004: 1282).<sup>8</sup> This is not merely the disabling rhetoric of those outside the field, but it inheres in the very definition of the digital divide. As Gunkel (2003) points out, the fact that this research takes as its premise a dichotomous variable replays a broader binary opposition within Western culture, such as ‘literate’ and ‘illiterate.’ He goes on to note that not only is this binary unable to represent something that essentially resists division into a simple either/or dichotomy, but also institutes an asymmetrical hierarchy (2003: 516). The dichotomous variable of technology ‘haves’ versus ‘have-nots’ is said to be caused by the variable race. Once



these variable terms and putative causal relationships are set in place, it becomes difficult to see beyond these to envision race in a social context. Nakamura is able to bring social context back in to the discussion of the digital divide in her examination of studies that habitually characterize Asian and Asian-American Internet users as 'the most wired group in America.' Yet, such descriptors obfuscate the rather glaring methodological flaw that routinely excludes the 69% of Asian-Americans who speak little or no English and are thus not included in the random-sample surveys that purport to measure the digital divide. Language that dubs Asian-Americans 'the most wired' group in America deceptively represents them 'as honorary or approximate whites in a way that obscures their actual oppression and position as material labor base rather than as privileged consumers of Internet- and IT-based services and media' (Nakamura, 2008: 179). Thus, both the disabling rhetoric of blacks and Latinos as on the "wrong side" of a dichotomous divide and the obscuring language of Asian Americans as "most wired," conceptualize race as a causal variable in Internet studies in ways that replay the spectacle of the Other while reaffirming whiteness as normative.

Racial identity online was a 'discovery' within a supposedly race-free setting. The early focus in the literature on race and the Internet (Burkhalter, 1999) evoked the language of exploration and discovery (e.g., 'discovering racial identity in a Usenet group'). This rhetoric was consistent with then-current descriptions of the Internet as an 'electronic frontier' and suggests the gaze of the colonizer. Today, studies that purport to 'discover' race have mostly been eclipsed by research on racial identity online that is tied more closely to traditions of resilience and resistance. As Kvasny and Igwe point out, for African-Americans, racial identity is part of a longstanding struggle against white domination marked by slavery, segregation, the great migration, the civil rights movement and the black power movement (Kvasny and Igwe, 2008: 570). Scholarship has shown that people seek out online spaces premised upon valences of racial identity, whether at Blackplanet.com or AsianAmerican.net (Byrne, 2008). Yet, when the scholarship on racial identity is viewed in the broader context of the field of Internet studies, a field that is silent on that longstanding struggle and generally unaware of white domination, it takes on a different valance. Viewed from that vantage point, the excellent work on racial identity is marked as outside the central theoretical concerns of the field, and it is left to 'minority participants' to give voice to their experience of racial identity in cyberspace. In other words, they are asked to perform the spectacle of the Other about the experience of people of color online and off.

Conceptualizations of race as a causal variable contributing to dichotomous 'divides,' or as identity 'discovered' in otherwise raceless frontiers by 'minority participants,' perform a kind of slight of hand. Together, these suggest difference inheres in the racialized Other, and in Hall's words, sends "'Them"... into symbolic exile ...beyond the pale' (Hall, 1997: 258). What remains unmarked here is whiteness and the way that white people, too, have race. Simultaneously, racism on the Internet is largely ignored within Internet studies and sorely undertheorized.

### *Anything but racism*

A number of scholars have pointed out the resistance to critically analyzing racism within social science (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi, 2001; Feagin, 2010; Steinberg, 2007; Zuberi



and Bonilla-Silva, 2008) seems to be shared with the field of Internet studies. Jenkins, again, accurately captures the zeitgeist of the field:

One Asian American talked of having a white online acquaintance e-mail him a racist joke, which he would never have sent if he had known the recipient's race. ... Such missteps were usually not the product of overt racism. Rather, they reflected the white participants' obliviousness about operating in a multiracial context. (Jenkins, 2002)

Jenkins hears a report of a racist email and quickly moves to dismiss it as 'not the product of overt racism' but 'obliviousness about operating in a multiracial context.' His response is similar to the ones encountered by Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva when presenting research findings about racism and who meet resistance from those that insist on finding 'anything but racism' to explain such findings (2008: 4–15). The overwhelming majority of the research reviewed here focuses on some aspect of racial identity, while only a small portion focuses on everyday expressions of racism on the Internet (e.g., Harris et al., 2010; Steinfeldt et al., 2010; Tynes and Markoe, 2010).

The lack of attention to racism in the field is partly attributable to the fact that the field of race and Internet studies is undertheorized. Nakamura has called for greater theoretical attention to the contemporary constellation of racism, globalization and technoculture in which the Internet is implicated and she suggests that this constellation is undertheorized (2006: 30). To address this lack of theory, some scholars have turned to Omi and Winant's *racial formation theory*. 'Racial formation' refers to 'the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed' in societies like the United States (Omi and Winant, 1994: 55). However, I contend that this, for the most part, is an unfortunate theoretical turn for the field of Internet studies. Omi and Winant's theoretical framework struggles over racial meanings more than it struggles over racially ordered institutional structures, power networks and organization of resources (Feagin and Elias, 2012). The 'process by which racial categories are created,' a process in which Omi and Winant chiefly implicate the State, does not implicate racism. Indeed, Omi and Winant focus very little theoretical attention on racism, and when they do they tend to dismiss the significance of racism by locating it within individual racialized prejudices. Within such a framework, racism is defined as 'a set of erratic beliefs that may lead racist actors to develop "attitudes" (prejudice) against the group(s) they conceive as inferior, which may ultimately lead them to "act" (discriminate) against the stereotyped group(s)' (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi, 2007: 138). In race and Internet studies this means that researchers design studies to measure individual levels of racial prejudice associated with particular Internet practices (e.g., Melican and Dixon, 2008). Research that separates the 'good' versus the 'bad' apples in the population through surveys on racial attitudes bounds the problem of racism ideologically and theoretically by keeping out more structural (or institutional) views (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi, 2007: 138). It also creates a false equivalency that denies the asymmetry created by gross inequities (Feagin and Elias, 2012). Omi and Winant, for instance, contrast the 'black supremacy' of black scholar and intellectual Leonard Jeffries with the 'white supremacy' of non-intellectual, non-scholarly racist extremists such as Tom Metzger (1994: 73). Such a theory is not especially robust when it comes to the task of explaining the vexing and pervasive appearance of racism in public comments online, which is better explained through a

critical, dramaturgical framework that locates racism as a central concern (Picca and Feagin, 2007; Steinfeldt et al., 2010). The reality is that in the networked society (Castells, 1997) racism is now global (Daniels, 2008a, 2009a; Back, 2002), as those with regressive political agendas rooted in white power connect across national boundaries via the Internet, a phenomenon that runs directly counter to Omi and Winant's conceptualization of the State as a primary structural agent in racial formation. Ultimately, racial formation theory is, in the way it is most often used, an unsatisfying theoretical framework for interrogating the complicated connections between racism, globalization and technoculture in which the Internet is implicated.

### Seeing whiteness

Stuart Hall refers to an 'imagined community' in which those who are 'normal' are bound together, separated from those who are marked by difference. On the Internet, and in Internet studies, this 'imagined community' is constituted by whiteness, as Jenkins describes:

Perhaps when early white Netizens were arguing that cyberspace was 'color-blind,' what they really meant was that they desperately wanted a place where they didn't have to think about, look at or talk about racial differences. (Jenkins, 2002)

The longing and desperation to avoid having to 'think about, look at, or talk about racial differences,' is endemic to contemporary whiteness (Delgado and Stefancic, 1999; Rasmussen et al., 2001). Sociologist WEB Du Bois remains among the most astute observers of whiteness (2003/1920). An early observer of the Internet, Kali Tal, urged researchers to draw on DuBois for theorizing about race and whiteness. Tal opens her 1996 piece in *Wired* with an epigraph from DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* and goes on to write: 'I have long suspected that the much vaunted "freedom" to shed the "limiting" markers of race and gender on the Internet is illusory, and that in fact it masks a more disturbing phenomenon—the whitinizing of cyberspace' (Tal, 1996). Brock continues in DuBois' theoretical tradition when he writes, 'To the extent that cultural values are transmitted through Internet content, we can draw on DuBois' observations about Black and White culture to evaluate Internet content' (2006: 364). Brock describes DuBois' view that white culture was forged in the legacy of slavery; the bond among whites continues to be reified in ways that justify social control of Blacks, as well as sustain discriminatory practices and beliefs (Brock, 2006: 363). Tara McPherson brings theoretical sophistication to the study of whiteness online in her examination of neo-conservatives in the southern US (McPherson, 2000, 2003). McPherson argues that notions about the South often map onto tropes about southern hospitality and the southern (white) lady. She contends that these discursive constructions tend to conceal and disavow hard historical truths, particularly about the myriad ways that systematic racism scaffolds whiteness, southern-ness and femininity.

The work of scholars interrogating whiteness in Internet studies (e.g., Bernardi, Brock, Kendall, Leonard, McPherson, White) point the way forward and illustrate that there has been some interest in reversing the gaze, yet this is not well developed within

Internet studies. Part of what is needed here, I contend, is a strong theoretical framework that acknowledges the persistence of racism online while simultaneously recognizing the deep roots of racial inequality in existing social structures that shape technoculture. An important contribution here is Feagin's recent work that extends the insights of DuBois through the analytical framework of systemic racism (2006) and the white racial frame (2010). Taking the long view of white Americans' interactions with and treatment of people of color, Feagin's articulation of systemic racism includes the many exploitative and discriminatory practices of whites, the unjustly gained resources and the power for whites demonstrated in the hierarchy linking 'race' and material well-being, the many racial images and narratives that fall under the umbrella of the white racial frame (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2010; Feagin and Elias, 2012). Throughout this long socio-historical development, he argues, a powerful white racial frame has been established that reinforces and perpetuates the beliefs and practices of systemic racism. The implication from this for future research that seeks to address race and racism on the Internet is that we must resist the longing for a color-blind Internet and eschew a white-framed field of Internet studies.

To accomplish this task, Internet scholars need to think differently about race, racism and the Internet. Racism has both 'whitened the national narrative,' (Sinclair, 2004: 2) and 'whitened our technological stories' (De la Peña, 2010: 925), and we must interrogate this. To do otherwise leaves the field of Internet studies entranced by the spectacle of the Other, denying racism and unable to see its own whiteness.

## Conclusion

My starting point was a review of the current state of the field through three broad substantive areas: race and the structure of the Internet; race and racism in what we do online; and race, surveillance culture and social control, all important areas for future empirical investigation. There are substantive areas missing in this review. For instance, current estimates are that approximately 8% of all people in the US are using Twitter, a combination microblogging and SNS where users post 140-character updates, and that it is more popular among Blacks and Latinos than whites.<sup>9</sup> There are interesting conversations about race happening on Twitter (e.g., sometimes following hashtags such as #blacktwitter and #browntwitterbird). To date, there is no research in the peer-reviewed literature about race, racism and Twitter and this will surely change soon. Given the pace of change on the Internet, new forms of Internet practices will emerge quickly and, with them, new expressions of race and racism. My intention here is not to reify or solidify these as subfields of race and Internet studies, but rather to offer a panoramic view of where the field is now. Indeed, some of the most interesting research about race, racism and the Internet in the next decades will be those that offer a pastiche, crossing several of the categories set out above, such as Brock's (2009) interrogation of a discussion of *The Wire* between 'thug' fans, blog readers and an academic/blogger staged by *The New York Times* to explore racial meanings, and Nelson and Hwang (2012) exploration of genealogical 'roots revelations' on YouTube.

In the analysis, I offered some critiques of current emphasis in the field on race as a 'variable' and as 'identity,' two conceptualizations that slip too easily into attention on

individuals rather than on understanding the way race is embedded in structures, industry, and regulation of the Internet. Closely tied to this is the fact that the burden of noticing race on the Internet has been left to Internet researchers who are people of color, reinforcing what Stuart Hall refers to as the 'spectacle of the Other.' This is not in any way to disparage that research or those researchers, but rather to shed light on the preponderance of research about the Internet done by white people that rarely acknowledges the salience of race but instead clings to a fantasy of a color-blind web. Even more unusual is any recognition of racism on the Internet and this is connected, I argue, to the theoretical weakness of the prevailing *racial formation theory* in Internet studies. Instead, researchers interested in advancing the field of Internet studies about race and racism would do well to explore the work of DuBois and more recent theorists, such as Feagin, who have extended his theoretical framework in ways that are more robust for understanding racism. I conclude by echoing the call of other scholars for a more thorough critical interrogation of whiteness on the Internet and in Internet studies.

This review and analysis is intended as an invitation to an exciting area of research in Internet studies, rather than as a final statement on the field. I hope this essay provides a starting point for further discussion.

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## Notes

1. See, for example, this discussion at the popular technology site TechCrunch following the announcement of the release of *Blackbird*: <http://techcrunch.com/2008/12/08/blackbird-is-a-custom-browser-for-african-americans-built-on-top-of-mozilla/>.
2. Pew Internet and American Life Research Project, 'Mobile Access, 2010,' Posted 7 July 2010. Available online: <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Mobile-Access-2010.aspx>. Accessed 10 July 2010.
3. Eglash notes and is critical of the implicit whiteness in Turkle's description of MIT geeks as 'pasty faced' (Eglash, 2002: 60).
4. Thorsen, Tor. 'US gamer population: 170 million – NPD.' *GameSpot*. Posted on 31 July 2009; Available online: <http://www.gamespot.com/news/6214598.html>. Accessed November 27, 2010.
5. 'Race in Digital Space (Revisited): An Interview with Sarah N. Gatson,' 1 December 2008, [http://henryjenkins.org/2008/12/what\\_fan\\_studies\\_has\\_to\\_learn.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2008/12/what_fan_studies_has_to_learn.html). Accessed 28 November 2010. See also, Robin Anne Reid and Sarah Gatson (eds), *Transformative Works & Cultures*, Special Issue, on Race, Ethnicity and Fandom, forthcoming in 2012, <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/announcement>.
6. Washington, Jesse. 'Racist Comments Pose Quandry for Mainstream Sites,' Associated Press, 26 September 2010, Available online: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/sep/25/racist-messages-pose-quandary-for-mainstream-sites/>. Accessed 15 October 2010.
7. To be clear, Jenkins here is critical of this view of the digital divide.
8. Michelle Wright comes to a similar conclusion: 'The reality is that technology is the product of ten thousand years of world civilizations, of which African civilizations were a central contributor, and African-Americans have been regular contributors, from ironing boards to

cell phones. The reality of the digital divide, I concluded, bore an uncanny and disturbing resemblance to racist beliefs about race and technology' (Wright, 2005: 29).

9. Tennant, Ian. 'Twitter proves popular among Blacks and Hispanics in the US,' for Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, posted 1 June 2011. Available online: <http://knight-center.utexas.edu/blog/twitter-proves-popular-among-blacks-and-hispanics-us>. Accessed 27 June 2011.

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