

## **Race and Digital Media: An In-Depth Review**

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*Race and Digital Media: An Introduction* by Lori Kido Lopez dives into the intricate and complex relationship between the social construction of race and the virtual landscape in which we now spend the majority of our time residing. Lopez is a professor of Communication Arts and Asian American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, whose research focuses on how marginalized groups employ media to advocate for their own equality and inclusion. Being published in a new digital age, this book deeply analyzes the relationship between race and social topics affected by digital media such as artificial intelligence, infrastructure, gaming, and more. As our society continuously progresses towards a tech-dependent future, it is crucial to understand how deeply technology affects the “other” to develop solutions against the harms while catalyzing the existing solutions, especially since each chapter also mentions how digital media has improved racial inequality. *Race and Digital Media: An Introduction* is a “just-right” read on the critical intersection of race and technology, with its perfect digestibility permitting scholars and academics at all levels to understand. The book enables readers to recognize how race and media have been connected in the past and present and pushes them to think critically about where it’s going. However, its broader focus on other marginalized groups sometimes detracts from the original matter of race and makes it difficult to connect sections.

In 11 chapters, Lopez discusses how racial groups and marginalized communities are impacted by digital media and vice versa. She argues that race and digital media are deeply intertwined in how society consumes and produces content, as well as the positive and negative effects it has on racism. Calling on the works of numerous scholars, Lopez builds a network of theoretical insights and practical examples that serve as a foundation for her claims. Her inspection stretches all the way back from historical events like American slavery, to present-day hot topics such as the perpetuation of racial bias through artificial intelligence. By underpinning

her arguments on current events with historical context, Lopez creates a comprehensive piece of writing to bring her readers along in exploring the relationship between race and technology.

Lopez sets the scene in the first two chapters through an introduction that discusses how digital media has terraformed the landscape of racial identity and conflict, as well as an examination of the history of the relationship between race and the internet. The introduction further explains how the concept of race which most people believe to be grounded in biology and science is actually stated as, "...a set of categories that have been misrecognized as natural, when in fact they have been actively created and recreated by human beings" (Lopez, 2023, p. 3). The rest of the introduction mentions how racism has been upheld by institutions and policies as well as how technology aids in the constant evolution of it. The introduction is followed by a brief history of "the early internet" and how racism in earlier forms of media has now subtly persisted into digital spaces. Starting the book with these sections allows the reader to reframe their previous mental model of race and engage with the rest of the book with more context and a fresh perspective. The following chapters primarily focus on how digital media enforces racialization and bias, but Lopez also includes the good— discussing how intersectional communities break through these barriers and employ digital media to induce change.

Chapters 3 through 5, "Labor", "Infrastructures", and "Artificial Intelligence" delve into how race and its construction intersect with various systemic structures and digital technologies. Chapter 3, "Labor" explores how racialized labor serves as the foundation for places like Silicon Valley that, on the surface, seem to thrive off the work of successful caucasian men. However, Lopez disproves, explaining how the roles of marginalized workers like content moderators, immigrants, electronic workers, and more, are the backbone of these companies. She also

touches on concepts of racialization in the workplace like microaggressions, the inability of non-Caucasian employees to rise to high positions, and the lack of credit to other racial groups.

“Infrastructures” is about both physical and digital infrastructures and the racial inequality resulting from these social systems. As our world becomes increasingly reliant on technology and the internet, there is a need for universal access. Through this chapter, Lopez investigates the lack of access to digital resources from marginalized communities due to environmental locations, socioeconomic disparities, and race. These unfair disadvantages are perpetuated in a cycle and are difficult to escape from because of the deficiency of resources.

In Chapter 5, Lopez addresses how racial bias is deeply rooted in advanced technologies like artificial intelligence. Because AI is trained on pre-existing data sets made by humans, it is destined to be biased in varying degrees, particularly in areas like facial recognition, policing, and suggested content systems.

Chapter 6, “Surveillance” analyzes how the development of technologies like facial recognition and biometrics enables everyone to be surveilled in ways we do not quite understand, and how certain race groups are watched more closely than others. In this chapter, Lopez brings up the roots of slavery and the constant monitoring of slaves to prevent escapees as well as border control and the extreme policing that occurs to keep out Mexican refugees. Lopez ties this history back to the present to emphasize that “racial hypervisibility” continues today with the previously mentioned technologies and how they are unfairly biased against black and brown communities.

Chapter 7, titled “Tech Policy”, goes back to the systematic racism written about in chapters 3 and 4. The author talks about how technological policies like algorithm design and information regulations are created and perpetuated through the pre-existing racial inequalities

that plague our world. She critiques how existing policies fail to recognize the needs of marginalized groups and reinforce disparity like how not all Indigenous nations own or have direct access to the data that is rightfully theirs (Lopez, 2023). This chapter advocates heavily for changes within the tech industry to make data more accessible and equitable.

Chapter 8, “Activism” takes on a more positive tone, focusing on activism and how digital media has streamlined the process of driving social change. Lopez mentions various movements that have thrived as a result of web tools like hashtags and memes and their ability to spread things far and wide in a matter of hours. Though she critiques some aspects of it, she mostly highlights the unmatched power of activism organized online through campaigns like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo which generated a large amount of traction using hashtags.

Chapter 9, dives into video games as a digital medium and how racism is all too common within gaming communities. Lopez discusses how racism is perpetuated through stereotypical misrepresentation of non-white characters and storylines which reinforces harmful narratives to the players that are engaging with the game. Moreover, the ability for players to hide behind a screen with little to no consequences enables players in gaming communities to exhibit racist and offensive behavior. Lopez (2023) highlights that trash-talk in voice and text chat between players can “quickly turn to hate speech when players are recognized as non-white” (p. 155). Despite this, she also talks about the dual nature of games and how they can be used as educational tools to create empathy such as *Everyday Racism*, a game that aimed for white players to put themselves in the shoes of a person of color to experience and empathize with their struggles (Lopez, 2023).

Chapter 10, “Communities”, explores how the internet has enabled the rise of digital spaces that cultivate connection, solidarity, and activism. Lopez mentions how these

communities support each other through the sharing of humor, food, diasporic experiences, and other forms of art. Although a less content-heavy chapter, it is still crucial for readers to understand the transformative potential of digital media in achieving equal rights and visibility.

The book concludes with Chapter 11, “Into the Future”. Lopez analyzes how we can move forward and what the future holds if we continue to spur action in the right direction. She reflects on the concerns discussed in earlier chapters and urges readers to take this knowledge and put it to use. Lopez (2023) ends the book with these two sentences that leave the reader with something to chew on: “We are in control over how they operate, what impact they have, and what relationships we form with them. There is immense potential in this relationship to change our world for the better (p. 197).

Lopez does exceptionally well in this book linking the relationship of race and media between the past and present, providing readers with the necessary historical context beyond the 21st century to fully grasp how race and media impact each other today. She is also aware of the necessity of beginning with the roots of race and racialization to place the readers in the correct context to understand her argument. The first two chapters set the stage for the rest of the book, disproving common beliefs that race was created due to phenotypical genetics that separate certain people from each other. The reality is that less than 0.001% of our genetic code leads to a physical difference in appearance in humans (Lopez 2023).

This historical framing is not just limited to the opening chapters but is provided as groundwork for the other topics covered in the book. For example, Chapter 6, “Surveillance”, tells the story of Sarah Baartman, an African woman abducted from her country to be showcased in London in the 1810s. This story further develops the context of how racism has been exacerbated in the past which affects our present. Addressing these injustices and building this

foundation of understanding lets Lopez then draw connections between systemic racial issues and how they continue to exist within digital spaces. Structuring the book like this ensures that readers will understand the roots of racism and how they are built into our systems, encouraging them to think critically about the reasons why racial inequality through digital media continues to persist in the ways Lopez says.

This book also effectively demonstrates that although digital media can and does perpetuate racism, marginalized communities have taken the opportunity to utilize it instead as a powerful tool to combat racialization to amplify their voices, create safe spaces, and drive collective action. As mentioned earlier, “#BlackLivesMatter” was a movement that began online and led to global in-person demonstrations. The author draws upon this example to show how the internet is used to circulate information and she states, “...protestors already began to mobilize, using Twitter and other digital platforms to disseminate information, mourn, and call for justice” (Lopez, 2023, p. 131). This type of framing contrasts against other scholars who tend to narrow in on the harmful aspects of media and technology. Safiya Noble’s *Algorithms of Oppression* exclusively calls attention to racism enforced by search engines. On a similar note, *Race After Technology* by Ruha Benjamin primarily focuses on how structural oppression is enhanced by technology. Although these remain serious topics to discuss, Lopez takes it a step further to spotlight how communities take back and reclaim the very things that work against them. She repaints them not just as helpless victims oppressed by institutions and racist policies, but as resilient and courageous individuals who actively fight back against an unfair world.

This is important to illustrate because an overwhelming focus on the qualities of the underprivileged can unintentionally frame them as weak or powerless. While barriers to equality certainly do exist, it is still essential to recognize and acknowledge the agency, innovation, and

pure strength that these communities exhibit in working towards a world where they are empowered. Lopez excels in giving these groups their well-deserved credit, sharing several stories and works from marginalized groups who have used digital media to provoke change. As noted in Chapter 9, projects like *Everyday Racism* depict the innovative ways that marginalized groups use digital media to reshape mindsets and bring about new perspectives. Supplying a wide variety of such material not only helps the readers recognize the victories of marginalized groups using digital media but also solidifies Lopez's argument about the positive potential of digital spaces. Through her writing, the reader can clearly see that Lopez values their resistance and cares just as much about demonstrating how digital media can be used against systemic oppression.

While *Race and Digital Media* presents a multitude of eye-opening perspectives that are rarely seen in similar publications within this field, no book is perfect. Throughout the book, Lopez frequently seems to travel off the original path of race and onto a new one, namely, intersectionality. With a title like *Race and Digital Media*, the author is expected to dive into that relationship, which Lopez does. However, it does seem that she very often includes examples of other oppressed groups like women and members of the LGBTQ+ community without connecting it to race. While I recognize the necessity of including relevant stories to strengthen the overall argument, these tangential stories bury the original thesis and can cause the reader to question the cohesion of the book. *Race and Digital Media* is about how the two subjects are uniquely interwoven, and the seemingly random snippets of other group experiences do nothing to add to how race and media are connected.

Part of chapter 3, "Labor", begins by diving into microaggressions against people of color in the workplace, but later takes a sharp turn to talk about sexual harassment in the



workplace. In this passage, Lopez (2023) states “It is not surprising to learn that...unwanted sexual advances were extremely common for women in positions ranging from lower ranking roles all the way up...” (p. 50). At this point, the preceding and succeeding texts mention nothing about race or its relation to sexual harassment in the workplace—it solely focuses on women. She then abruptly swings back to race again in a new section on content moderation and the reader is left wondering how the previous argument relates to the theme of both the current topic and the book itself.

A bright side can be seen from this style, as it forces the reader to rely on real stories and evidence to understand the relationship between digital media and race instead of taking everything the author says at face value. I believe that the drawbacks of so many niche talking points are more detrimental, though, as readers are constantly swept from one point to another with sub-optimal bridges between and after. This makes for a dizzying reading experience that is difficult to follow and makes it seem as though Lopez is trying to hide her argument with an overwhelming amount of content. Because all 11 chapters already cover rather different things, it might be more beneficial for Lopez to dial it back and address these themes from a broader view rather than zooming into the details of each grain of sand that makes up this immense beach of a predicament.

*Race and Digital Media* is a must-read that serves as a crucial contribution to the ongoing discussions on how race, technology, and media intersect in the way that it presents a wide range of racial experiences caused by digital media across time. Using an abundance of other academic works as a foundation, Lopez brilliantly pushes the audience to think critically about the systematic inequalities rooted within our society by reframing how race is perceived and highlighting the victories that racial groups have gained from using digital media and technology

to their advantage. In a world where scholars and readers tend to get caught up in words, Lopez's writing transports the reader from mere academic concepts into the real world where issues of racial injustice are tangible and concrete. Lopez's writing does, at times, wander from the original subject as she talks about issues beyond race. Regardless, her eagerness to address the matters of this ineffable world illustrates her genuine passion for this subject, which makes up for the occasional drifting. Pathos is as important as logos, even in academic writing. Knowing is different than feeling. In these 11 chapters of *Race and Digital Media*, Lopez successfully enables the audience to see and feel what racial oppression is like. It is emotion that stimulates transformation, and after reading this book, readers are bound to recognize the emerging challenges between race and technology and rise against them.

## References

Lopez, L. K. (2023). *Race and Digital Media: An Introduction*. Polity Press.