Colorblind Ideology in Traditional and Online Media: Towards a Future Research Agenda

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Abstract

While much research has looked at colorblind ideology in mainstream traditional media content and production, few studies have investigated the expression and status of colorblind ideology in social media. The present chapter addresses this discrepancy by reviewing academic literature on colorblind discourse in both traditional and social media. In the light of the literature reviewed, this chapter (i) underlines the complexities of both on- and offline expressions of race and racism, and the extent to which they are co-constructive. Furthermore, this chapter highlights the need to (ii) sensitize media practitioners and researchers on colorblind ideology to ensure that (iii) racism is treated, in research as well as in the media, as a structural phenomenon rather than as punctuated events.

Introduction

Changes in media landscapes have opened up possibilities for media users to access and engage with a variety of content going well beyond the scope of national imagined communities. For this reason, new media landscapes raise questions regarding the visibility given to difference and diversity in what is shared online as well as users' practices and interactions. Previous research has widely examined discourses of difference and diversity in traditional media in relation to audience effects, representativeness, and (mis)representations (e.g. Jacobs, Hooghe, & De Vroome, 2017; Schlueter & Davidov, 2013). These studies have highlighted the role played

by traditional media in shaping society's response to diversity in general. On the other hand, far fewer studies have explored the way diversity is dealt with in online (social) media and results point to different directions. Findings indeed suggest that online content and practices could be either going into a more diversified and multicultural direction (e.g. Barberá, 2015) or into a more discriminatory and segregated one (e.g. Cisneros & Nakayama, 2015). Addressing this research gap and ambivalent findings is a pressing issue given the increasing role played by online (social) media in the social construction of realities. Furthermore, being able to properly address intersections between diversity and traditional and online media is an essential step to understand how they re-shape intercultural communication (Sommier, 2014). This chapter therefore sets out to provide an overview of the current state of research on these topics and sketches directions for future research. For this purpose, this chapter discusses the main trends and findings in existing literature on the topic of colorblindness in both traditional and social media.

We first introduce the concept of colorblindness from a social psychological perspective. This part lays a clear theoretical ground to understand differences between multiculturalism and colorblindness and implications of these concepts across strands of research in intercultural communication. Following this brief discussion, we successively discuss the state of literature regarding operations of colorblindness in traditional and in online (social) media. The compilation of previous findings provides an overview of the main research areas, remaining research gaps, and discrepancies in results. In the light of previous research, we conclude by discussing some of the main challenges and directions for future research.

Examining Colorblindness from a Social Psychological Perspective

When examining how members of majority and minority groups in society react to diversity, scholars often use theories rooted in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). At its core, this theory poses that individuals have the tendency to categorize their social environment into groups based on shared characteristics. People consequently identify with *in-groups* that share their own characteristics while individuals who appear different are categorized as belonging to an *out-group*. This categorization helps individuals to predict and give meaning to their social environment; a positive evaluation of one's in-group as compared to out-groups can provide a source of self-esteem. However, the downside is that social categorization leads to the emergence of stereotypes and group representations that tend to favor the in-group over the outgroup. Culture, race, and ethnicity are considered among the most prominent categories along which individuals organize their social environment, and are some of the most salient and deeply rooted social identities (Fiske, 1998). Examining societies' reactions to diversity in cultural identities, scholars have identified two contrasting ideologies: multiculturalism and colorblindness (Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008).

The multiculturalist ideology is characterized by an emphasis on the positive side of individual differences: it explicitly recognizes that diversity in terms of culture, ethnicity, race or any other social category provides added value to society . Extending this to the social identity paradigm, multiculturalists allow or even encourage minority members to identify with their own cultural in-group. Research shows that multiculturalism leads to more positive and secure identities and to an openness to and acceptance of a wider range of opinions and behaviors within society at large (Verkuyten, 2005). The downside of multiculturalism, however, is that the side-by-side existence of many group identities complicates social interactions and may cause prejudice and conflict (Fiske, 1998). Furthermore, as we have recently seen in many Western

societies, majority groups often view multiculturalism as a threat to the dominant culture, leading to frustration and increasing prejudice and anti-immigrant sentiments (e.g. Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2015).

In contrast, the colorblind ideology is based around the idea that it is more beneficial to actively ignore or downplay cultural/ethnic differences. From a colorblind viewpoint, it is important to reduce minority members' identification with their in-groups, in favor of an overarching identity, such as an organization or society as a whole . One of the areas where the colorblind ideology is most visible, is in statements about diversity in the workplace, for example in organizations whose recruitment policies state that they 'exclusively focus on a candidate's qualifications' and ignore their cultural background (Jansen, Vos, Otten, Podsiadlowski, & van der Zee, 2016). A similar discourse is upheld by politicians who promote a colorblind approach to immigrants' acculturation into society, by emphasizing overarching common values and identities (Jugé & Perez, 2006). As will become clear from this chapter, mainstream media play a significant role in the popularization of this ideology (e.g. Jacobs et al., 2017).

Colorblindness appears to be intertwined with traditional Western values such as meritocracy, individualism, and a high need for belonging). Advocates of colorblind ideology often claim neutrality or objectivity towards cultural/ethnic differences. However, others have argued that colorblind ideology constitutes a denial of the complexity of a diverse social environment (Markus, Steele, & Steele, 2000). In fact, colorblindness has been shown to be positively related to racial bias (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004).

There is quite some evidence that minority members generally are not supportive of the colorblind ideology (Jansen et al., 2016). Stevens, Plaut, and Sanchez-Burks (2008) provide some reasons for these findings. Firstly, although the colorblind perspective is based around the

ideal of treating all people the same, minority members appear to view it as neither colorblind nor color neutral, but instead as exclusionary (Markus et al., 2000). The colorblind perspective implicitly downplays the importance of cultural identification and openness to diversity, which is interpreted as a denial of minority members' own cultural heritage and an attempt to erase diversity (Hofhuis, Van der Zee, & Otten, 2016). The threat to their in-group identity, as well as a lack of room for cultural maintenance, has been associated with lower well-being among minorities (Dover, Major, & Kaiser, 2016). Furthermore, when minority members perceive a devaluation of cultural/ethnic differences, frustration, dissatisfaction, and conflict are more likely to occur (Hofhuis et al., 2012; Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009).

Secondly, the colorblind ideology places importance on individual competences and ability to navigate the complexities of the majority society. However, these criteria of merit are often a reflection of the norms and values of the majority group, and are thus inherently biased against the minority group (Goldberg, 2005). As a result, colorblind ideology, although grounded in rhetoric of equality, plays mostly into the hands of the majority group, by protecting the existing status quo of group hierarchies. Rooted in a denial of cultural differences, colorblindness therefore conditions the acceptance of out-group members to the dismissal of their ethnic/cultural backgrounds. The colorblind perspective is thus associated with expanding exclusion of minorities, and a demand for assimilation of majority norms and values.

Racial/Ethnic Stereotypes and the Operation of Colorblindness in Mainstream Media

In the past decades much research has focused on how mass media act as a powerful frame of reference for media consumers to think and communicate about cultural difference. Some of that research has focused on the ideological and discursive work the media *do* in

framing racial and ethnic relations. The common assertion in those studies –mostly conducted in the United Kingdom and United States– is that media coverage mainly reinforces hegemonic discourses surrounding race and ethnicity and strengthens racism through unconscious bias and simplified representations (e.g. Drew, 2011; Nishikawa, Towner, Clawson, & Waltenburg, 2009). Campbell, Leduff and Brown (2012) showed, for instance, that the U.S. news media routinely represent Black people in a dichotomous way, as either completely assimilated or as violent criminals. Behind the first type of representation, which Campbell, Leduff and Brown (2012) coined the *assimilation myth*, lies the idea that Black people are fully assimilated and racial discrimination no longer exists. In contrast to this *assimilation myth*, the U.S. news media have also framed Blacks as criminals thereby perpetuating a centuries-old widespread discourse which associates blackness with danger and amorality. Campbell, Leduff and Brown (2012) showed how the combination of these two contrasting discourses not only provides people with a simplified narrative around a complex reality but also leaves no space for addressing wider racial inequalities in society at large that may constitute a wider background for deviant behaviors like criminality. As a result, Black criminality in the media is represented as solely a result of *non-racial* dynamics (Bonilla-Silva 2003, as cited in Alemán, 2014). This fundamental ignorance or blindness to existing racial dynamics and inequalities can be seen as one of the main characteristics of colorblind racism. Colorblind racism is a commonly used racial discourse in today's society and operates through a claim that racial discrimination does not play any significant role in society anymore and is something of the past – while reality and race based research actually show otherwise (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Colorblind racism thereby allows people - including media professionals - to deny structural and

institutionalized forms of racism while at the same time using everyday, racial/ethnic stereotypes without being aware of that.

Studies focusing on diverse media genres or other racial and ethnic categories than Black and White have confirmed the subtle ways mainstream media reproduce racial and cultural stereotypes to give meaning to racial/ethnic minority groups on an everyday basis, often in an unconscious manner (e.g. Kim & Chung, 2005 for U.S. advertising; Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2016, for news media; Van Sterkenburg, 2017, for international sport media;). The White majority remains relatively unspoken and goes unmarked. In so doing, the media present narratives that racializes non-White minorities while de-racializing the White majority group (Haymes, 1995, as cited in Alemán, 2014).

Notwithstanding the evidence of racial/ethnic bias and stereotypes in the media, research shows that (Western) media professionals *themselves* often believe race or the use of racial/ethnic stereotypes is not an issue in their own media practices. Campbell, Leduff and Brown (2012) concluded, for instance, that U.S. "local television journalists are unaware of how their own racial attitudes affect the coverage" (p. 14). Bruce (2004) and Knoppers and Elling (2004) found in their sports media studies that individual journalists argue they are free from the use of racial/ethnic or gender bias in their own coverage – though U.S. commentators did show some awareness of the existence of racial stereotypes in sports journalism generally (Bruce 2004). Some researchers have used the term *sincere fictions* in this respect which refers to the personal mythologies that media professionals uphold for themselves as being objective, race-neutral (color blind) professionals who are free from any racial/ethnic bias (Feagin & Vera, 1995; Spencer, 2004). Knoppers and Elling (2004) and Nishikawa, Towner, Clawson and Waltenburg (2009) in their studies for the Dutch and U.S. context found that norms such as

objectivity and *neutrality* constitute key professional norms for many media professionals. These values are seen as fundamental to the job. They are acquired through formal training and education as well as the institutionally prioritized codes within the media industry (Knoppers & Elling, 2004; Silk, Slack, & Amis, 2000). At the same time, however, as we have argued before, previous research indicates that media coverage is not *race-neutral* or *objective* but incorporates racial/ethnic biases and reinforces hegemonic discourses surrounding race and ethnicity. This is not only evident in the use of stereotypes but also in the underrepresentation of minority ethnic news sources and the marginalization of minority ethnic voices and interests in media (Campbell et al., 2012; Ortega & Feagin, 2017). Nishikawa et al. (2009) concluded, for instance, that U.S. journalists usually relied on a limited set of official sources like formal political leaders and government officials who are mainly White males. Such bias in terms of media stereotypes and the *power to speak* results in the marginalization and misrepresentation of minority voices and experiences in the media, and an ignorance of their perspectives. Not surprisingly, some research has shown that minority ethnic media users tend to reject racial/ethnic stereotypes while their White majority ethnic counterparts may be aware of the stereotypes but tend to accept them as reflecting reality at the same time (e.g. Costera Meijer & De Bruin, 2003; McCarthy, Jones, & Potrac, 2003).

The presumed *objectivity* and *colorblindness* media professionals subscribe to masks how media coverage is often situated within a majority ethnic, White perspective (Van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2012). Drew (2011) and Ortega and Feagin (2017) wrote that most full-time journalists, decision makers and media owners in the mainstream media industry are White males. Research shows that White media professionals tend to draw on hegemonic societal discourses surrounding race and ethnicity that are easily available to them, but that they have

difficulty seeing their own whiteness and White situated discourses (Bruce, 2004; Ortega & Feagin, 2017). As a consequence, White media professionals incorporate racial and ethnic stereotypes which privilege White people belonging to the racial and ethnic majority while at the same time denying or downplaying the use of these same stereotypes in order to maintain a positive colorblind self-image. Within this colorblind logic, as we have argued earlier, structural racism is seen as something of the past and incidents of racism within or outside of the media are often seen as mere *individual* acts of specific prejudiced individuals/commentators. A focus on individuality instead of racial ideology shifts attention away from institutionally embedded normative whiteness which still permeates mainstream contemporary media. It justifies the lack of *substantive* measures on the institutional level to increase racial and ethnic diversity and inclusiveness within media production.

Race, Racism, and Colorblindness Online

In contrast with traditional media, expressions of race and (colorblind) racism online have not been extensively researched (Daniels, 2012; Titley, 2014) though they are starting to get more attention. Different approaches have been used, some scholars build on existing theories to examine online racism (e.g. Durrheim, Greener, & Whitehead, 2015) while others have developed frameworks that take into account the technological features of online environments (e.g. Sharma, 2013). There also seems to be a push towards inclusive approaches that would be used to investigate online and offline expressions of racism as integrated and co-constructive (e.g. Titley, 2014). Overall, these studies highlight race and racism as multifaceted concepts that are articulated through different notions and constantly re-invented. More importantly, the

emphasis placed on the role of online environments in re-shaping racism means that scholars are dismissing long-standing assumptions in research about the Internet being race-free.

For a long time, researchers strongly believed that online and social media would increase tolerance, educate, and connect individuals (Jenkins, 2002). These optimistic views were intertwined with the idea that dematerialized online presence would downplay or even dismiss race. Studies have however shown the extent to which race is embedded in online structures, vocabulary, and users' practices (Daniels, 2012; White, 2006). By contradicting pervasive assumptions about race and racism being limited to perceptions of bodies, these findings underline race as a social construct deeply ingrained in (online) discourses. These studies also highlight the Internet as a colorblind environment in which explicit mentions of race were dismissed and White privilege maintained. Jenkins (2002) explains how colorblind assumptions underpin perceptions of many White online users who fail to see the Internet as a diverse environment. The premise that other online participants are White unless they explicitly mention otherwise reveals the prolongation of offline colorblind views into online practices. Information provided by users in their profiles highlights similar trends as the description *White* or *Caucasian* is typically left out, therefore de-racializing that category and constructing it as the norm from which other racial identities, which tend to be explicitly mentioned, deviate (White, 2006).

Similarities also exist between offline and online colorblind racism as regards the strategies used to discuss race in covert ways. Studies have for instance noted the way users can share pictures rather than words, use de-racialized but suggestive categories, or claim freedom of speech to counter accusations of racism (Durrheim et al., 2015; Sharma & Brooker, 2016). Latent and ambivalent references to race have been shown to be central discursive resources to

colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). These strategies enable to convey racist ideas while respecting the codes of post-racial political correctness, which can be especially important for online and social media users who often endeavor to construct socially desirable identities on these platforms (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). Issues related to identity have been greatly investigated by research about online practices and race. Findings suggest that online and social media tend to be used to comfort people's views rather than open up new horizons (Daniels, 2012). Users' practices suggest racial digital divides (e.g. boyd, 2013) as people join networks that can offer them community support to develop racial identities and discuss racial prejudice (e.g. Korn, 2015) or, on the contrary, uphold racist agenda (e.g. Adams & Roscigno, 2005). Kettrey and Laster (2014) mention the existence of *White spaces* which are created through the combination of both colorblind and blatant expressions of racism used to exclude users identifying as minorities.

Several studies have drawn attention to the interplay of explicit mentions of race and colorblind racisms in online settings. In their study of tweets following the election of the first Indian American contestant as Miss America, Cisneros and Nakayama (2015) highlight the difference between offline expressions of race characterized by moderation, political correctness and colorblindness, and overtly blatant racialized online discourses. Some researchers posit that such discrepancies in discourse can be explained by users' false impression of privacy and confidentiality on social media (Daniels, 2012). This phenomenon echoes Picca and Feagin's (2007) notion of *two-faced racism* regarding discrepancies between private (i.e. racist) and public (i.e. tolerant) attitudes of White college students towards race. Ambivalent discourses towards race that were usually confined to private sphere can therefore be exposed in online and social media where public and private boundaries are redefined.

Online expressions of race indicate new trends while also building on and including older discourses (Daniels, 2012). Online environments can reshape and add new facets to existing discourses of race and racism because of their inherent features. For instance, Daniels (2009, 2012) discusses the combination of existing racist rhetoric with Internet-specific resources such as cloaked websites that are designed to covertly convey specific agenda. Researchers increasingly urge to take a holistic approach to understand the complex interplay between existing offline structures and discourses of racism, and online expressions (Sharma, 2013; Titley, 2014). Such analyses suggest that the apparent dichotomy between on- and offline expressions of race and racism in fact indicate more complex dynamics at play. Rather than existing separately, on- and offline expressions of race and racism co-exist and co-construct each other. Tynes and Markoe's (2010) investigation of the relation between colorblind attitudes and responses to racially subversive content in social media draws attention to offline colorblindness and online racial bias as mutually constitutive. Their study suggests that colorblind attitudes translate online as users condone racially biased or prejudiced content. Sharma (2013) puts forth the concept of *digital-race assemblage* to examine the various elements involved in the constant remaking of race online. This concept emphasizes the importance of not reducing online expressions of race to the use of pre-existing categories through a different medium. It instead endeavors to highlight the interplay between existing and new discourses, and the technologies that articulate them. Such a holistic approach is put forth as a solution not to compartmentalize the study of racism and to capture the depth and complexity of how racisms are shaped today.

Challenges and Directions for Future Research

This chapter has presented the state of literature on colorblindness in traditional and online (social) media. Similarities regarding key issues and upcoming challenges will now be discussed to indicate future directions for research. Specifically, the importance of (i) sensitizing practitioners and researchers on colorblind ideology to ensure that (ii) racism is treated, in research as well as in the media, as a structural phenomenon rather than punctuated events will be addressed. Finally, the need to (iii) adopt holistic approaches to understand interplays between racial and colorblind expressions of racism across media and regions will be discussed.

Professional bias as regards colorblindness is an issue that matters to both media professionals and researchers. Alemán (2014) and Nishikawa et al. (2009) stress that future research should focus on revealing and dismantling the operation of colorblindness and whiteness in media production. Such research should also attend to the ways race and ethnicity and racial and ethnic diversity is addressed in journalism *education.* Media professionals internalize journalistic norms and values such as objectivity and race-neutrality on the workfloor and through their training. Journalistic norms and values that can be valuable in themselves can also be catalysts for the operation of colorblind racism if they limit self-reflection. It is therefore essential to ensure that students are trained in becoming sensitive to issues of race and ethnicity and in using ethnically diverse news sources in their future media practices. This applies not only to majority but also to minority media professionals who just as well tend to prioritize hegemonic 'colorblind' norms regarding their role as media professionals (Nikishawa, 2009). Alemán (2014) therefore warns against easy solutions to achieve a more diverse and inclusive media coverage such as just increasing the number of ethnic minority media professionals. Just adding some minority journalists to counter critique of White-dominant news (Alemán, 2014) does not challenge how issues related to race/ethnicity are discussed in journalism education and

how future journalists of minority and majority groups are trained and socialized. Put differently, as long as the vast majority of mainly White media reporters, future decision makers as well as the professors who teach future journalists are complicit with a colorblind logic, whiteness and colorblindness will remain deeply embedded in media production, media coverage and the training of future media professionals. Critical self-reflection on the use of racial stereotypes from those responsible for producing media content is necessary to realize that racial stereotyping and colorblind racism are closer to home than they usually assume. For such critical self-reflection to emerge, scholarship that critically examine the 'doing' of race and the racial rhetoric of colorblindness and whiteness within the media production process is essential.

A similar warning can be addressed to researchers who sometimes fail to see the workings of colorblindness in their own professional environments. Daniels (2012) argues that minority scholars are the ones noticing online expressions of racism. The small amount of research exploring race and racism online further underlines researchers' lack of reflexivity about their own position towards racism. This affects what is being studied- as suggested by the research gap on operations of colorblindness online- as well as research outcomes. Several researchers (Daniels, 2012; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008) have indeed highlighted the propensity of many scholars to displace the problem and label practices or discourses in their findings as "anything but racism" (Daniels, 2012, p. 709). These limitations suggest the extent to which colorblind ideology can underpin researchers' own (construction of) knowledge and can therefore be sustained. This highlights the importance for researchers to acknowledge racism as a structural phenomenon that also affects educational institutions. The idea that institutionalized forms of racism do not exist anymore is a key feature of colorblind ideology that posits race and racism are things of the past and racial discriminations and prejudice as punctuated isolated

events. These views are pervasively shared among majority members who fail to see how the system favors them and who can reproduce these views through the positions of power that they hold. Media professionals, educators, and researchers therefore need to be sensitized to the workings of colorblind racism in order to tackle it as a structural and institutional form of discrimination and not downplay its range and implications by limiting it to individual cases.

Another important outcome of this literature review is the need to conduct future research on racism from a holistic perspective. Exploring interplay between racial expressions of racism and colorblindness ideology is important to understand how both notions keep on being reinvented and by whom. For this reason, future research should also pay attention to the relation between traditional and social media in negotiating colorblind and racial expressions of racism. There are many instances of social media being used to draw attention and criticize examples of colorblindness in professional media. Similarly, professional and social media can be used to call out blatant racism expressed online. Thus, investigating further the permeability between professional and social media is an important step to understand how they mutually contribute to reinvent expressions of racism.

The wide range of notions that can be associated with colorblindness and racism draws attention to another important research area. By downplaying the explicit mentions of race, colorblind ideology expands the scope of racism through conflations with, for instance, culture, ethnicity, and religion. As a polymorphous notion, racism poses challenges for researchers. It also hints at the existing theoretical and methodological tools within the field of intercultural communication since concepts that overlap with (colorblind) racism are already prominent in that discipline. Strands of research that explore the power and politics of culture (e.g. Holliday, 2011) or the importance of reflexivity in developing intercultural competence online (e.g. Kędra,

Laajalahti, Sommier, & Uotila, 2016) are examples of existing resources within the field of intercultural communication to address operations of (colorblind) racism online.

The urge to take a holistic approach to expressions of racism online and offline indicate the importance of exploring transnational discourses. Research about race and racism online is mostly focused on the North-American context and associated racial politics (Titley, 2014). Expanding the scope of research is therefore a pressing issue since expressions of race and racism are embedded in historicized and political contexts. However, investigating race and racism online highlights the specific need and difficulty of finding a balance between local and transnational contexts. Expressions of race and racism are deeply situated as they are intertwined with historical and societal elements. However, online platforms bring together discourses and audiences from different contexts, which adds a potential transnational level to expressions of race and racism. As a result, scholars emphasize the need to take into account both local aspects of race and racism, what David Goldberg (2006) conceptualized as *racial regionalizations*, and transnational aspects of online discourses and representations. Thus, correcting the north-American bias of literature on online racism should consist of combining scales and perspectives rather than simply regionalizing research (Titley, 2014).

Conclusion

Reviewing literature on colorblindness in traditional and online (social) media allowed us to highlight the scope of challenges related to engaging with diversity in an increasingly mediatized age. This chapter draws attention to the relations that exist between different expressions of racism, different types of media, and different levels of imagined communities. Echoing recent studies, this chapter therefore highlights the need to explore colorblindness from

a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to capture how it operates across countries and media. The final section of this chapter raises issues of importance for scholars as well as practitioners. Attention is drawn to the urgency of familiarizing researchers, and media professionals and teachers, with the workings of colorblindness and concrete implications for their own practices. The importance of self-reflexivity across professions is critical to address (colorblind) racism as a systematic rather than individual phenomenon. Despite gaps in the literature, directions for future research underline the promising contribution that the field of intercultural communication can make given its current foci and its methodological and theoretical resources.

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