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# White Screen/White Noise: Racism and the Internet

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Heather McCann is a Reference Coordinator and an Urban Studies & Planning and GIS Librarian at MIT. Outside of work she is active in the Boston Radical Reference Collective. With BRRC she helped to organize a Critical Librarianship Symposium last fall. She was also a volunteer librarian at A-Z Library, the Library of Occupy Boston.

Myrna Morales, a teacher and librarian by training, but an activist at heart, spends her time maintaining websites and supporting internal technology systems through her work at the National Network of Libraries of Medicine—New England, and integrating new technologies into community organizations and governmental agencies through her work as Program Coordinator at Community Change, Inc. in Boston.

Stacie Williams is the Learning Lab Manager at the University of Kentucky, Lexington. Prior to moving to Kentucky, Stacie's experiences took her from reference work at Harvard University's medical library, Transylvania University and Lexington Public Library to news librarianship at the *Christian Science Monitor*. Archives work includes the Jim Henson Company and the Chicago Defender. With a background as an award-winning background in journalism, she uses social media to intercept misinformation to her audience. This past March, she served on the SXSW Interactive panel entitled "Black Twitter Activism: Bigger than Hip Hop."

## Abstract

The Internet is critical for disseminating information, but it does not discriminate against information it carries. Hate speech and racist representations proliferate in social media, online news comment sections and community forums. What can information workers do to counteract those messages? How can critical race consciousness enhance on- and off-line library services? This article attempts to explore how information in the age of rapid

technology innovation contributes to structural racism and what librarians and other information professionals can do about it.

Keywords: racism and librarianship; critical race information theory; race and technology; digital race literacy

## Introduction

The Internet is critical for disseminating information, but it does not discriminate against information it carries. Hate speech and racist representations proliferate in social media, online news comment sections and community forums. What can information workers do to counteract those messages? How can critical race consciousness enhance on- and off-line library services? This article attempts to explore how information in the age of rapid technology innovation contributes to structural racism and what librarians and other information professionals can do about it.

Librarians have historically supported the ideals of freedom of speech, represented and protected by the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment both on- and off-line. Freedom of speech is one of the most highly protected amendments of the U.S. Constitution; however, there are conditions when governments have acted to limit speech and the expression of ideas. For example, hate speech, including racist speech, is permitted to take place as long as it does not incite a physical manifestation of violence. The American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights, Policy 3 (1996), states libraries should challenge the infringement of free speech: "Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment." Thus, the library profession, as one of the gatekeepers and stewards of information, has a deep commitment to defending freedom of speech and expression, regardless of media format.

Globally, there have been several recent events when digital media have been censored. For example, the shutting down of social networking sites and restricting portions of the Internet during the Arab Spring protests, and Google's decision to permit several nations to limit access to "Innocence of Muslims," a film trailer that sparked heated and deadly protests across the globe. The United States proves to be no exception: one of the largest, ongoing debates within the American library profession centers on whether the U.S. government should be allowed to mandate the filtering of pornographic materials in federally funded libraries. This debate is an important example for this paper because it is a case in which the library profession has actively organized to circumvent censorship and has devised alternative ways for regulating and dealing with online material deemed offensive to members of the community.

One major argument against installing filtering software on federally funded library computers was important information, such as sexual health information, was often censored along with pornographic material. Consider then what would happen if libraries considered filtering racist information online: anti-racist content would be excluded just as racist content would since both utilize the same terminology and language and similar Search Engine Optimization approaches—some sites to unpack racism, others to further entrench it.

Rather than filtering, another means of regulating Internet content is to target Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and social networking sites such as Google and Twitter, and hold them accountable for hosting such content created and shared on their company servers and networks. In the current iteration of the Internet, one where the line between providers, producers and users is blurred, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify and hold an individual responsible for creating racist content, a company for hosting the content that this individual has created, or other individuals sharing the racist content. In 2012, Safiya Noble wrote about the innate bias within Google's search engine algorithm. In a classroom experiment, she had her students search for "black girls," "Latinas" and other racial, gendered and sexual identity keyword combinations for women. The top search results continually were pornography sites. The Google search algorithm in this way reflected the hypersexualizing of marginalized girls occurring in all other major media formats and throughout culture. Though it has been argued a machine or programming code cannot inherently hold a constructed position, such as racism or sexism, this argument does not take into account it is indeed a non-machine, a human programmer who initially constructs this code. And though pattern recognition is often used in machine learning, as is with the case of the search algorithms for Google, we must ask who gives value to data and its representations? This is exemplified by the rhetoric of the digital divide.

Similarly, the design of technological products influences or reinforces falsely constructed views or implicit biases of its designer. The computer keyboard template is constructed in standard English and speakers of other languages often have to resort to multiple steps to type in another language. In Walter Isaacson's biography of Apple founder, Steve Jobs, he documented a conversation with Susan Kare: "Jobs rejected one of the renderings of a rabbit, an icon for speeding up the mouse-click rate, saying that the furry creature looked 'too gay'" (Isaacson, 2011, p. 131). This is not to say Steve Jobs was homophobic; this is to say design and technology, much like racism, is deliberately constructed and therefore directly reflect our worldview. Jobs felt "design is the fundamental soul of a man-made creation that ends up expressing itself in successive outer layers" (Isaacson, 2011, p. 343). However, it is a mistake to conflate fundamental with universal.

Innate bias exists not just in the creation of the technology; it is also present in the execution and use of those technologies. danah boyd [sic] writes about the racial stratification that occurs on social networking sites or the "white flight" of users from Friendster, MySpace and Hi5 to Facebook. In the aftermath of the February 2012 Trayvon Martin shooting, a white supremacist organization Stormfront posted photos of two different black youths alleged to be photos of Martin. One photo portrayed a youth with gold teeth, the other showed a different youth raising his middle fingers to the camera. Stormfront sought to negatively shape public opinion of Trayvon Martin with this misdirection. Yet, several mainstream and "credible" news outlets published these same photos without first researching their provenance or authenticity and considering the ramifications of perpetuating racialized misinformation. This is a clear example of how structural racism insidiously worked its way into a larger discourse; no one thought to question the malicious intent behind the photos or what stereotypes journalists were reinforcing by publishing them (Chittum, 2012, March 26).

Another example of structural racism on the Internet is the lack of websites' moderation of comment forums. Only recently have information sites like Salon.com and *Chicago Tribune* (chicagotribune.com) become proactive about comment moderation due to Internet "trolls" inciting controversy. Additionally, in 2013, racist commentary on the Cheerios commercial posted on YouTube depicting an interracial couple resulted in the site having to shut down the comments section for the video. Reddit.com users falsely propagated the lie that Sunil Tripathi was the perpetrator of the Boston Marathon Bombings. Tripathi, a Brown University student, had gone missing weeks before the bombing. Tragically, police discovered that he had committed suicide in Rhode Island; as a result of the site's comments, his family, already dealing with the grief and pain of a missing loved one, was targeted for verbal, racist attacks on social media (Sanyal, 2013, April 19).

The role of librarians in the alternatives to censorship polemic centers on gaining a firm understanding of the various digital manifestations of racism—a need to understand how racial microaggressions appear in online comment forums and social networking sites, an awareness of how media sources portray people in condescending, outdated, and discrediting ways and to realize the continuing limits and possibilities of Internet technologies and networks to serve as institutional spaces for anti-racist discussions. Librarians need to debate whether they are disseminators of racist information or if they can be editors of it. Many attempts to regulate other arenas of hurtful discourse and images online have not been successful, and at times these initiatives have run up against informational professional's ideals and values. It seems neither legal nor technological interventions can serve as long-term solutions to curtailing or

eradicating racist information and interactions online. Ultimately, the profession should seek solutions focused on making changes in the realms of social norms and cultural values.

Already, the profession has a number of successful racial minority leadership development and recruitment programs, namely the ALA Spectrum Scholarship. However, discourse on the social norms and cultural values of the profession and its members focus on celebrating multiculturalism. Considering the racial demographics of the U.S. library profession, where is the explicit discussion of racism? And to take it a step further, where is the discussion of white privilege and whiteness?

In 2005, Todd Honma wrote an article called "Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies." His main questions: "why is it that scholars and students do not talk openly and honestly about issues of race and racism, and instead limit the discourse by using words such as 'multiculturalism' and 'diversity'? Why is the field so glaringly white, and yet no one wants to talk about whiteness and white privilege?" Honma suggests the library and information studies (LIS) field as a whole chooses to substitute the less controversial discourses of diversity and multiculturalism—discourses that inadequately represent the racial discrepancies in our field—for racism.

In 2011, a study came out of Wayne State University and Syracuse University iSchools entitled "Are We There Yet: The Results of a Gap Analysis to Measure LIS students' Prior Knowledge and Actual Learning of Cultural Competence Concepts." The study's investigators, Renee Franklin Hill and Kafi Kumasi, surveyed LIS students, asking them to rate the amount of knowledge they had before courses began and after courses began to evaluate the impact and inclusion of cultural competency concepts in LIS education. Some of the knowledge gaps that appeared include:

- Understanding the cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives on literacy
- Recognition of barriers to information access and use that may exist for individuals from various cultures
- Recognition of the role libraries play in providing outreach and specialized services to various cultural groups in the US
- Familiarity with the history of library service to individuals from various cultures
- Recognition of how individuals from various cultures access information

Franklin Hill and Kumasi's findings led them to conclude that LIS administrators should create a curriculum map that consists of core cultural competency concepts; create outcomes documents that track the inclusion of cultural competence skills and learning outcomes; and craft certificate programs that incorporate or focus on cultural competence education.

The authors of this paper also conducted an environmental scan of ALA accredited library schools course catalog and syllabi, when available, and found many were lacking in classes that explicitly addressed race, oppression, access, power and privilege in the class descriptions and syllabi. There were a few noted exceptions, such as the University of Arizona's Knowledge River program, but overall, considering the racial demographic of the library profession, discussions of whiteness and racism—in an online context or otherwise are not present in our LIS programs.

Myrna Morales conducted an environmental scan of 372 colleges and universities libraries across the country to see which had subject or LibGuides focused on racism. She also did searches for other oppressions—in particular, sexism and classism. The term racism appeared anywhere between 0.3% to 3% of the time on the libguides. Of course, this is not weighted or normalized. The terms sexism, classism, and homophobia (0.3% to 1.5% combined) appeared even less frequently than racism while terms representing less controversial discourse such as diversity and multicultural had a higher rate (5% to 10%) (Martin, 2013).

## So What Can Librarians Do?

Cultural values and norms are inseparable from learning. New technologies provide the opportunity, and tools to make meaning from many types of information (text, images, spoken word, music, code, etc.). The skills required to use those tools are different from those associated with traditional information literacy, where the information found in books and articles in the library has been vetted by a framework of gatekeepers (author, peers, editors, librarians, public, etc.). The new skills include digital literacy, critical self-reflection/literacy (for both librarians and users), and critical race consciousness. Critical race consciousness is a different approach to the critical evaluation of online sources, an important part of information literacy.

Anti-racist training and organizing is different from cultural competency and diversity training. Anti-racist training has a strong chronological component that reveals to participants how U.S. laws reflect and preserve white privilege. Librarians need to develop their own cultural competence to provide reference or instruction of any kind, but particularly for digital instruction. Critically evaluating our own assumptions and, for some of us, understanding our privilege allows us to recognize areas of oppression that may have been invisible to us



before. A greater level of critical reflection and cultural competence can help librarians become more aware of the exclusive language or subtle racist nature of information found or valued on the Internet. Every librarian can be a diversity librarian. Diversity in libraries extends beyond outreach and programs to include how we evaluate how we build and use collections, offer reference services, and do instruction.

## Collections

The current ways that the academy documents life (both present and past) is not equally representative of the information producing community: prioritizing the collection of journals with high impact factors leaves inevitably leaves a great deal of stories unheard. A benefit of the Internet is that it has allowed for users to develop new methodologies so that information seekers may be able to hear voices that were previously silenced, undervalued, oppressed. An example of a site that gathers several of these free resources is available from Community Change, Inc. (<http://www.communitychangeinc.org/content/civil-rights-movement-oral-histories-personal-accounts>).

Libraries frequently make decisions for their collections based on economic factors. They cannot afford to collect everything, but why is it considered acceptable to justify the expense of a new \$10K journal based on a ranking of journals indexed in Thomson Reuters Journal Citation Reports, but not to find money to digitize a local neighborhood association's newsletter published during the tumultuous period of urban renewal?

## Searching

Another option for systemic change is related to our search interfaces. Searching for information in different languages and different alphabets is often difficult or impossible. While the Library of Congress has a transliteration standard for non-Roman alphabets, the transliteration often includes diacritics. Searching library catalogs using diacritics is frequently not an option—so the transliteration may not provide useful results when searching online catalogs. A systemic solution for this problem would involve more widespread use of diacritics and greater facility for searching transliterated material (or even searching for material in its original alphabet).

## Critical Evaluation of Resources

Jesse Daniels has covered the evaluation of online resources extensively and I draw on her work for this section. In particular, the proliferation of 'cloaked websites,' designed to mislead users into believing they have found a reliable

source of information, when in fact they have stumbled on a site that deliberately aims to mislead. Many of these sites promote racist information. A well-known example of this type of site is martinlutherking.org, which is set up to mimic the types of K-12 educational websites that students use to find information.

Students, those that are fortunate to have a school librarian or access to a public librarian, may have received suggestions for evaluating online resources. However, frequently this instruction is presented as a checklist. It doesn't provide them with the practice or skills needed to help them critically evaluate website that may pass all the checks for superficial criteria for quality.

Library instructors can help to fill those gaps by asking students to dig deeper and apply a racially critical lens.

1. Look at the URL: Students are told that when looking at the URL, they can evaluate a site based on some sort of hierarchy that looks like .gov, .edu, .org, .com. In reality, students need to know that someone can just as easily register an .org domain name as a .com or .net, and they, thus, still need to approach .org sites critically.
2. The meaning of bias: Sometimes the bias of an article is the best thing about it. Avoiding all bias isn't necessary, but understanding what is meant by bias, and how it can shape the information on the page is. In Jessie Daniels' book *Cyber Racism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on Civil Rights*, she shares enlightening conversations that she has had with high school students about how they interpret bias. Several students assumed that the martinlutherking.org cloak website mentioned above (produced by white supremacists) might be a more reliable site for information about Martin Luther King, Jr. than the site produced by the King Center. They based this claim on the assumption that the King Center's site might be more biased because his family created it.
3. Trusting search engine rankings: Alarming studies show that students believe that search results are ranked by search engines for a reason, which they assume to be relevancy to their search or reliability of the site.

These ideas are just the beginning. Finding, evaluating and using information found online requires a much different skillset than finding information in a library book, where the editors, publishers and librarians have all done some prior vetting. Librarians can help to raise critical consciousness by developing new pedagogies that enable users to develop multiple literacies and critical

thinking skills to help them evaluate the information they have found. The need for cultural competence and critical reflection and critical race consciousness in libraries encompasses more than just librarians—libraries are interconnected with other civic institutions: K-12 schools, universities, courts, legislatures, media. In order to change social norms, cultural values and integrate critical consciousness in our approach to creating, disseminating and valuing information, librarians need to partner with these institutions to affect systematic changes.

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