“On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” This adage, which has been around since the advent of the Internet, has become an important contextual framework used to examine the medium. The implication is that when one traverses into virtuality, our physical bodies have no bearing on our experiences and outcomes because, often, no one knows who we are. Early Internet scholars theorized that virtual environments would provide an outlet to exist beyond the parameters of the body (Daniels 2012). In its early days, the liberating potential of the Internet had extreme lure; however, this lure existed in a realm of assumed whiteness, as the Internet was traditionally a domain of the privileged. “Cyberfeminists” argued that the Internet had liberating qualities that could free women from the confines of their gendered bodies (Bromseth and Sunden 2010). The premise, however, has been criticized as both utopian and irrelevant to marginalized circumstances in new technologies (Bromseth and Sunden 2010). We cannot just forgo our bodies in virtual spaces, because much of our real-world selves are emitted into these spaces. The discussion must move beyond the confines of the digital and be reexamined for its potential to mobilize the oppressed in both digital and physical spaces.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a contemporary context for the Internet as it relates to race and ethnicity. By examining the racialized dynamics in access (i.e., the “digital divide”), Internet usage (i.e., Black Twitter), and control (i.e., the lack of diversity and inclusion in Internet industries), this chapter will examine just how unequal the Internet still is along racial lines.

**Hegemonic Identities and the Internet**

Internet technologies and virtual communities are assumed to be white and masculine (Daniels 2013; Gray 2012; Kress 2009). These unequal power relationships are accepted as legitimate and are embedded in the cultural practices of digital technology, and the Internet is an important site to examine the production and reproduction of culture. Giroux (1997) contends that

the emergence of mass visual productions in the United States requires new ways of seeing and making visible the racial structuring of White experience. The electronic media—television, movies, music, and news—have become powerful
pedagogical forces, veritable teaching machines in shaping the social imaginations of students in terms of how they view themselves, others, and the larger society. (12)

Giroux recognizes the power and impact that electronic media have on culture, especially because of how widespread these technologies are disseminated. This pervasiveness deems the Internet a site worthy of exploration in the production of culture, especially as it is increasingly interactive, with user-generated content now constituting a large portion of the web (Jenkins 2008). The continued growth and expansion of the Internet requires that we develop the context in examining its ability to maintain whiteness.

Examining whiteness is an important part of examining race and the Internet. As a hegemonic entity, whiteness is the thing that has become too normalized to be able to see. This is the paradox of whiteness, being both assumed and in need of constantly being re-asserted. And its normalness makes it difficult to be analyzed. Chidester (2008), in an analysis of the rhetorics of whiteness, contends,

Whiteness uses the visual both to assert itself and to recede into the background when necessary. It is a rhetorical tool that can claim immense range and influence precisely because it is so difficult to affix to any single communicative text or set of discourses. (159)

But there is growing awareness of whiteness in popular culture (Carr and Lund 2009; Giroux 1997), especially in relation to the Internet. For example, the popular Twitter hashtag “#CrimingWhileWhite” exploded in the days after the death of Eric Garner, an African-American man who was killed by New York police, one of a series of racially polarizing police killings in 2014. Those reposting this hashtag quickly recognized the privileges associated with being white in sharing their tweets:

Played with realistic toy guns my entire childhood, wherever we wanted. #CrimingWhileWhite

My 13yo son and his friends were loitering at Walgreens recently. Only his black friend got searched for shoplifting. ~ #CrimingWhileWhite ~

Ticket for going 120. No license. Judge let me off. “You go to too good a school to be so dumb so I assume you aren’t.” #CrimingWhileWhite

Exhaled blunt smoke in a cop’s face as I opened my door and then told him he couldn’t come in without a warrant. He left. #CrimingWhileWhite

While the tweets do highlight recognition of privilege, inserting them into the #BlackLivesMatter conversation didn’t seem timely and only furthered the significance of white privilege: look at what we get away with! The point of the “CrimingWhileWhite” hashtag was not about the privilege afforded to whiteness, but rather the lack of privilege afforded blacks or the perpetual state of oppression for some over others. There was no movement to dismantle the power that led to this privilege.

What this acknowledgment of privilege does add to the conversation is that it increases the visibility of discourses of whiteness; further, this could indicate an important
shift in the way race operates, especially online. Citing Foucault, Fraser (2007) says “discourse is tied to the systems of power found in any given social formation at any given moment in time” (203). Thus, it seems an important moment to examine the current shape and variety of discourses of whiteness. Although whiteness is assumed in virtual spaces, it becomes apparent in not only creating the “other” online; it also informs the experiences of the “other.” While the Internet has aided in shaping marginalized communities by increasing their participation in civic society, a manifestation of real-world inequalities in virtual spaces exists and influences their virtual realities. Even in a laboratory space such as the Internet, racial and ethnic minorities are still marginalized.

Theories of Marginality

Theories of marginality focus on both the oppressive and constructive aspects of belonging and not belonging to multiple and opposing communities at the same time. Most of Michel Foucault’s theorizing of human identity focused on the ways in which the self is objectified through scientific inquiry (1988). Within this line of investigation, he examined the relationship between power and the production of knowledge and the discursive development of various disciplinary processes such as the gaze, which seeks to categorize, identify, and control society’s individuals. In particular, he examined how discursive formations were defined in large part by identifying that which lay outside its boundaries. Such boundaries and boundary-making are, however, areas of contestation and arenas for expressing domination in the production of knowledge. Marginalized users of Internet technologies have identified innovative ways to still participate within Internet culture, as this chapter will outline.

Discourse on identity is not only defined in terms of binaries, but is also shaped by hierarchical relationships of power. Black identities, for example, have been defined not only in contrast to white ones, but have also been shaped by various forms of power that have historically failed to acknowledge the voice of those identified as black in defining the parameters of the black and white binary. Before his death in 1984, Michel Foucault (1988) had been working on a set of ideas he termed technologies of the self. The work represented a shift in his focus away from the objectification of the self and toward the question of how a human being turns him/herself into a subject. As this chapter will explore, there are discursive realities of technology of the self that are both objectifying and subjectifying as racial and ethnic identity are approached using discursive terms constituted in the margins of objectivity/subjectivity, outsider/insider, and domination/liberation.

Latino studies scholars have also closely examined the category of marginality. In the seminal work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Latino identity is situated within the borders, in the in-between spaces. She writes: “The struggle is inner: Chicano, indio, American Indian, mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian—our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people” (Anzaldúa 1999: 109). Even though we may be working toward a postborder world (Dear and LeClerc 2003), where new cultural hybridities co-exist and mutate to form new possibilities, the Internet can be seen as recreating the physical border in virtual spaces by deeming some worthy of participation and others not. The hashtag #Yamecanse (I am tired) began dominating the online conversation in 2014 in the wake of 43 Mexican students disappearing, and the protesters began to declare their exhaustion and exasperation with state-sponsored violence and corruption that has seemingly become the norm (BBC Trending 2014).
The tweets revealed much more than just a rally to find missing students or a call to justice in Mexico; this hashtag led to the massive solidarity of Mexicans and Mexican Americans and led to more protests and demonstrations on the conditions of Mexican and Mexican Americans within our social institutions. Activists within the movement stated they wanted changes in our social institutions from education to health, and they used social media to help spread that message. It is also a direct indictment of how the Internet can transcend borders to reach the masses, but the reactions and backlash reveal to marginalized users that they still exist within the parameters of their bodies. Extending beyond social media, many activists used YouTube to highlight their frustration with the current method of justice. The quote below by filmmaker Natalia Beristain reflects the anger:

Senor Murillo . . . , I, too, am tired . . . . I’m tired of vanished Mexicans, of the killing of women, of the dead, of the decapitated, of the bodies hanging from bridges, of broken families, of mothers without children, of children without fathers.

(Associated Press 2014)

The appropriation of this comment made by the Mexican Attorney General, Jesus Murillo, in his failure to fully explain what happened, reflects the impact that social media has on coopting the narrative traditionally in the hands of the privileged.

Nakamura (2002) uses the lens of the remediation circuit to examine the contemporary design, production, dissemination, and consumption of racial formations. She begins her monograph by describing the proliferation of the Internet as inextricably linked to technological developments that put America on a graphical, rather than purely textual, interface of the Internet. Further, the racialized shape and content of the Internet’s visuality must also be understood as emerging alongside the neoliberal, colorblind politics of the 1990s. In this way, the universally equal citizens of cyberspace were imagined within the colorblind paradigm, behind the veil of ignorance, a raceless population. The Internet offered a space in which race and other identifying markers could remain hidden or ambiguous. However, rather than as technology, which allows its users to avoid race identification, the Internet, argues Nakamura, has largely remediated offline racial formations (Nakamura 2002).

Control

Internet scholarship illustrates a picture of a race-neutral creation and development of the Internet; nonetheless, race is directly implicated in the very structure of the design of Internet technologies. Daniels cites this example:

Everett (2002) 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.

The early design of the Internet stems from this racialized discourse and it is hard to disconnect the implicit meanings behind the dichotomous phrase, master/slave. Although many would contend no racist intent, the history of this country was built upon the
master/slave relationship and for the descendants of this relationship, black Americans, it is even more problematic.

Moving beyond the foundational language, the bodies on which the foundation was built are even more problematic. Many of the technological advances of the Internet rose out of an industry with significant disparities along race, gender, and class. Although the Silicon Valley may tout itself as diverse, these tech firms were and still are controlled by elite, white males. And as Daniels (2012) highlights, those who assemble the circuit boards and clean the offices are largely immigrant laborers. Other examples reveal a privileging of default whiteness, thus becoming the norm: the white hand pointer (White 2006), the default white avatar (Kafai, Cook, and Fields 2010), and the default white voice, among others. Sadly, when racial minorities challenge this prevailing notion of assumed whiteness, it is often they who are blamed for perpetuating racial inequalities. An example from videogame culture will illustrate this point. Virtual gaming communities are spaces that often dramatize certain aspects of identity, such as gender and class. Unfortunately, ethnicities are often absent. As Kolko (2000) argues, the Internet is far from liberatory but rather a space that sanctions a “cultural map of assumed whiteness” (225). And when there is an attempt to make race and ethnicity present, it is met with resistance. I will illustrate with the example of Leeroy Jenkins.

Leeroy Jenkins was a video created to promote guild play in World of Warcraft, the wildly popular online role-playing game (Gray 2011). The character Leeroy was an attempt to show what not to do during gameplay. Leeroy did not take the game seriously, he did not collaborate with his teammates, and he basically led to his team’s demise. This is a traditional racialized cybertype, as Nakamura (2002) explains, deploying traditional stereotypes of blacks as the inferior other, further legitimizing whiteness. The fact that World of Warcraft has a small number of black avatars shows that blackness seems to be allowed in sporadically, in small doses, and in a manner that fulfills the desires of the dominant, white other (Higgin 2009). For players and game designers, the deployment of this type of narrative confirms that “blackness is not an appropriate discourse of heroic fantasy” (Higgin 2009: 3). When bloggers began commenting on Leeroy Jenkins, any mention of racially stereotypical imagery enflamed many users within the space. In response, one user replied that Leeroy was merely a character within a game without a race. Comments such as these confirm what people of color already know—in virtual reality, everyone finally gets to be white (Gray 2011: 8). As Higgin (2009) observed,

The White dominance of gamespace has been recast as a racially progressive movement that ejects race in favor of a default, universal whiteness and has been ceded, in part, by a theoretical tendency to embrace passing and anonymity in cyberspace. When politically charged issues surface that reveal the embedded stereotypes at work amid an ostensibly colorblind environment, they are quickly de-raced and cataloged as aberrations rather than analyzed as symptomatic of more systemic trends.

(2009: 7–8)

There is an almost complete lack of interest in discussing racialized content and experiences within digital spaces. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva would suggest, it’s racism without racists.

According to Bonilla-Silva (2003), colorblind racism reproduces inequality and perpetuates white privilege because its practices are subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial. Importantly, colorblind ideology is a political tool that is used by the dominant group
(consciously or unconsciously) to maintain the racial order and preserve white privilege (as cited in Gray and Raza 2012).

Colorblind ideology is a pervasive belief system that rationalizes and gives power to the existing social structure—or rather, the racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003). Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2003) contends that the new racism is difficult to detect because colorblind ideology camouflages racial practices. In fact, colorblind racism reproduces inequality and perpetuates white privilege because its practices are subtle and embedded in the operation of institutions. Whites exercise colorblind ideology to rationalize the disadvantaged minority status as a product of the market, natural phenomena, and the cultural limitations of persons of color. The controversy that surrounded police shootings of racial minorities in 2014 and 2015 revealed similarly colorblind/racist stances of many individuals. Conservatives suggested that neither the race of the police officers nor the race of the victims mattered, and that those who brought race into the discussion were race-baiters. Comments and blog posts that reflected these ideas were abundant on the Internet, as were the critical analyses of policing in the twenty-first century. However, in our “colorblind” era, it could become difficult to decipher which commentary is rooted in a true examination of the reality in differential policing and which is just rooted in colorblind rhetoric. But without digital literacy, there are still permeations of racist discourse perpetuated online. Sadly, those who are victims of lagging behind the technological curve are often portrayed as marginalized members of our community.

The Digital Divide

The digital divide is broadly defined as the concern that certain groups in the population might not have access to information technology, which could impede their opportunities. Race has always been an important factor for predicting access and use of computers (Daniels 2012). A study conducted by the Census Bureau in the 1990s highlighted that African Americans had lower rates than whites in computer ownership and telephone service (Daniels 2012). This study led to the phenomenon known as the digital divide. Since then, blacks have been touted as poster children for the digital divide (Everett 2009). But an additional factor that this chapter will concern itself with centers on how having access alone does not close the digital gap. Scholars are now acknowledging that media literacy skills are equally important in closing the digital divide (Hargittai 2002; Lenhart 2003). Additionally, some research suggests that a lack of relevant content on the Internet influences blacks’ engagement in the medium (Hoffman, Novak, and Schlosser 2000; Lazarus and Lipper 2000; Kretchmer and Carveth 2001).

The most significant factor within the digital divide is the income gap, but when other identities intersect with income (race, gender, education, ability, etc.), outcomes are drastically influenced. Specifically looking at race, Attewell (2001) suggests that the racial digital divide exists mainly due to income and educational inequalities, rather than race alone (253). Poor and minority children are less likely to have access to computers and the Internet at home and school, while their parents are less likely to have access to them at home and work (Natriello 2001: 260). This is more than likely due to racial employment discrimination, which keeps minorities in the lower-income brackets and out of more technical occupations. In a study conducted by Hoffman and Novak, it was found that at the same income level (more than $40,000), African Americans in fact had a higher percentage of home computer owners. Although education levels can help explain why a higher percentage of African Americans earn an income of less than
$40,000, whites are twice as likely to have a home computer compared to their black counterparts, and slightly more likely to have access to computers at work (Hoffman and Novak 1998: 390).

As there are differences in access, there are also racial differences in use. As Yardi and Bruckman (2012) found, whites have Internet access and broadband Internet at higher rates than African Americans. On the other hand, African Americans use mobile phones more often than whites do, including for Internet use, to play games, and to use social networking sites. So although there may be some differences in use, rates of access, and adoption, the most significant differences are the types of devices used and the purposes they serve. A 2010 study by the Pew Research Center found that black, Latino, and low-income users were more likely to go online using smartphones than desktop or laptop computers. Nearly 20 percent of African-American smartphone subscribers use only their phones to go online, along with 16 percent of Latinos. The same is true of only 10 percent of white mobile phone subscribers. But no matter the medium employed, rates of Internet use are comparable.

The digital divide is a conceptual framework for understanding the historical and contemporary impacts on the diffusion of Internet technologies among marginalized groups and the adoption of those technologies within these populations. As Warschauer (2007) suggests, the concept of the digital divide is complex and represents a particular point in the chain of social inequity. The term digital divide represents the gap in information communication technology usage between social groups as classified by various identifiers (Gorski 2003). The digital divide can also be examined along the lines of race, educational achievement, disability status, citizenship, and English language proficiency. Wynn (2005) has identified three reasons for the continuation of the digital divide: (1) poor economic conditions lead to an inability to afford certain information technology apparatuses, including computers and connectivity mediums; (2) the progression of technology to more advanced stages could leave those at a further disadvantage; and (3) the state of disadvantage leaves these digitally divided groups incapacitated from educating and exposing themselves to opportunities within the digital world. Kvasny (2006) expands upon the concept of the digital divide and discusses digital inequality. This process links socio-economic factors such as poverty, discrimination, inconsistent employment, and education with the diffusion and usage of information and communication technology that perpetuate social inequity.

Another way to examine digital inequalities is to examine the experiences and realities of people of color after they gain access to Internet technologies. One such example stems from danah boyd’s (2011) work on teen social media use. In her research, she identified a trend among the racialized practices of a cohort of youth. As one participant revealed, MySpace, an early social networking site, became a ghetto with the increased presence of minority users. As a trend that exists in physical spaces, virtual spaces are also witnessing the flight of white users to other, less “urban” spaces. Teens in school self-segregate on the basis of social categories like race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, and social media is not exempt from this trend.

On the other hand, the presence of racialized others may compel some users to treat the minority intruder in a hostile manner so they will leave the space. In Xbox Live, Microsoft’s online multi-player gaming device, the presence of black-sounding gamers has led to significant racial harassment, and many black gamers self-segregate into private party chats on the Xbox Live system to avoid this type of treatment (Gray 2012). As minority gamers contend, their private spaces are virtual ghettos, as they have been redlined to these areas.
The use of the term ghetto has historical signifiers that reveal a larger connection to the intersection of race and class. It also refers to a “set of tastes that emerged as poor people of color developed fashion and cultural artifacts that proudly expressed their identity” (boyd 2011: 205). By using “ghetto” in the sense that the participants in this study employed, it relegated certain users to the margins of the Internet. Because of the adoption of colorblind ideology by many mainstream Internet users, there is a complete lack of awareness in how this leads to racism. But this factor influences racial minorities’ full access and adoption of Internet technologies.

Racial segregation on the Internet is also apparent in how it is used by white supremacist groups. The day after Barack Obama was elected as the first black President of the United States in 2008, Stormfront, the white Nationalist website, crashed due to the number of individuals visiting the site (Daniels 2012). This seems to run contrary to the idealized notion of racial equality and highlights the continued systemic racism that constitutes our reality. Hate groups who use the Internet to disseminate their ideological stances are savvy in the manner they present themselves. Using Stormfront as an example, they don’t employ terms like “racist” or “bigot” as the KKK might. Instead, they opt for less aggressive language and their homepage states that their “mission is to provide information . . . to build a community of White activists working for the survival of our people” (Black 2001). The Internet has provided a new outlet for hate groups to supplement their offline efforts. Even more disturbing, the Internet provides a level of anonymity—a kind of virtual KKK hood—that many members within these organizations seek.

There are others on the Internet who may not be organized in the manner that hate groups are, but they still engage in similar racist acts toward perceived racial minorities based on how they sound. Scholars have found that in virtual communities that rely on voice-based communications, a great deal of racism emerges. Linguistic profiling occurs when auditory cues are used to identify the identity of another person in a setting where they are not visible (Gray 2014). Similar to racial profiling, which uses visual cues, linguistic profiling relies on accent, slang, voice pitch, and other auditory markers to identify racial or ethnic backgrounds. Usually, this kind of voice discrimination does not warrant a hostile response. But in some cases, linguistic profiling may lead to avoidance, discrimination, harassment, and racism.

Researchers have documented this type of toxic environment for those with linguistic patterns that deviate from Standard American English in virtual gaming communities (Gray 2012). This “white” speech pattern has been defined as the norm by many within Xbox Live, while those who deviate quickly fall victim to harassment and racism. Black and Latino gamers in particular reveal that they are constantly harassed when the default gamer hears how they sound. They are told that they sound “too black” or that they use “too much Spanglish” for the space. This leads to the marginalization of a segment of gamers that constitute a huge portion of the gaming industry. As research indicates, these gamers are forced to segregate, leading to more ghetto-ization of virtual spaces (Gray 2012).

The Future

Scholars have warned against the “unproblematic” views of perceiving the Internet as a utopian space where all individuals and all groups have equal access to the production, dissemination, and consumption of information (Wei and Kolko 2005). Recent examples within popular culture reveal the innovative ways that the Internet can be used to mobilize racial minorities. The 2014 hashtag and subsequent movement, #BlackLivesMatter,
exposed the extent of the lack of understanding of the lived experiences of blacks within the criminal justice system. Racial minorities defy the stereotype as the poster children for the digital divide. They engage in Internet technologies in innovative ways that disrupt the hegemonic narrative of people of color as laggards in technology. Fortunately, criticism has called attention to these issues. Recognition of inequities in both technology use and representation has shifted the contemporary attitude toward the fluidity of identity and progressive signification through race.

If we are to truly dissect and transform how race is communicated within Internet culture, we need to focus our attention on the industry, on access, on Internet use, on experiences within virtual settings, on representations, and even on the politics of technological production. Without examining the underlying causes of the inequities, our critiques will be severely limited. Examining the perpetual state of whiteness within Internet culture allows us to extend the conversation of not only who maintains the Internet but also for whom it is maintained. Users must be sensitized to the performance of race online and to the filters through which they perceive race.

References


**Further Reading**

Daniels, J. (2013) “Race and Racism in Internet Studies: A Review and Critique,” *New Media and Society* 15(5): 695–719. (Interrogates race and racism as researched within media and Internet studies; employs racial formation theory and urges the need for a critical examination of whiteness in Internet studies.)


Nakamura, L. (2013) *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. New York: Routledge. (Interrogates how the Internet shapes and reshapes our perceptions of race, ethnicity, and identity, labeling them as cybertypes, similar to stereotypes.)


van Deursen, A. J. and van Dijk, J. A. (2014). “The Digital Divide Shifts to Differences in Usage,” *New Media and Society* 16(3): 507–526. (As the digital divide shifts to more focus on usage difference than racial difference, this article provides a much-needed interrogation of how cultures group-employ the Internet.)