

Spring 3-31-2015

# “My Brain Database Doesn’t See Skin Color” Color-Blind Racism in the Technology Industry and in Theorizing the Web

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## Recommended Citation

Daniels, Jessie. "“My Brain Database Doesn’t See Skin Color” Color-Blind Racism in the Technology Industry and in Theorizing the Web." *American Behavioral Scientist* 59, no. 11 (2015): 1377-1393.

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## INTRODUCTION

Color-blind racism infuses the business and theory of the popular Internet. The U.S. technology industry is worth over \$126.3 billion and accounts for more than 55 percent of global Internet and Communication Technology (ICT) research and development (Galama and Hosek, 2008). It relies on a workforce of more than 2 million people, a majority of who work in small to medium software and information technology (IT) companies with fewer than 500 employees (Buckley and Montes, 2002). Alongside this very large, profitable business, a smaller, cottage industry of theorizing about the web has emerged. The IT industry (hereafter, *the tech industry*) and the cottage industry of theorizing about it share an embrace of color-blind racism. The mechanisms of color-blind racism are evident in the way that people imagine the Internet, the way the industry has created an array of specific technologies known as "the Internet", and in the theories developed to explain the Internet. Within each of these domains, color-blind ideology contributes to the reproduction of racial inequality that, in turn, (re)shapes the Internet as fantasy, technology, and theory.

In order to explore the multifaceted dimensions of color-blind racism in the technology industry and the theorizing about it, this paper presents a theoretical synthesis of scholarly literature, the cultural artifacts of technoculture, and popular accounts of the technology industry. To do this, I examine three interconnected notions about color-blind racism and the Internet. The first idea I explore is the

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fantasy that the Internet *as a technology* is color-blind with regard to race. The second notion is the way that color-blind racism operates in *the tech industry*. And, the third concept I examine is the way color-blind racism manifests in *theorizing the web*, by which I mean both popular theorizing of the web and academic Internet studies. In this theorizing, developed both inside and outside the academy, race is either completely ignored, or contained either as a 'variable' in quantitative studies, or in more qualitative studies as an 'identity' that inheres exclusively in people of color but that leaves the way race is embedded in structures, industry, and the very idea of the Internet largely unexamined.

### **BACKGROUND: THE INTERNET, THE TECH INDUSTRY & THEORIZING THE WEB**

There is a circuit of influence between the popular Internet, the tech industry and theorizing about the web. Each of these is a distinct analytical category worth examining separately. In the passage that follows, I offer some background on the emergence of the public Internet, the tech industry that built it, and on the emergence of popular theorists who make their living from explaining the Internet to a general audience.

***The Internet.*** The Internet was developed in specific geographic places, institutional contexts and historical moments that helped shaped the technological innovations known as 'the web' (Abate, 2000; Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 2008). Yet, the geographic, institutional and historic specificity of Internet infrastructure and

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design are often ignored, and the significance of race and racism in this genealogy is often obscured. As Sinclair observes, “the history of race in America has been written as if technologies scarcely existed, and the history of technology as if it were utterly innocent of racial significance” (Sinclair 2004,1). In fact, race is implicated in the very structure of the ‘graphic user interface’ (GUI). For example, Everett observes that she is perpetually taken aback by DOS-commands designating a ‘Master Disk’ and ‘Slave Disk,’ a programming language predicated upon a digitally configured ‘master/slave’ relationship with all the racial meanings coded into the hierarchy of command lines (2002, p.125). Nakamura writes about drop-down menus and clickable boxes that are used to categorically define ‘race’ online, tracing them back to race as a key marketing category (Nakamura, 2002). Beyond the selection and targeted-marketing via race, elements of the interface are racialized. The nearly ubiquitous white hand-pointer acts as a kind of avatar that in turn becomes ‘attached’ to depictions of white people in advertisements, graphical communication settings, and web greeting cards (White, 2006). Despite a long history of innovation in technology (Taborn 2007), people from racial or ethnic minority groups are rarely depicted as innovators or leaders in technology, but rather are most frequently represented as consumers or operators of the technological wizardry created by whites (Kevorkian, 2006). Assumptions about the whiteness embedded in the infrastructure and design gets spoken when there are ruptures in that sameness, such as the introduction of an African-American-themed web browser, *Blackbird* in 2008. While *Blackbird* caused quite a stir among those

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who had operated on the assumption of a race-blind Internet,<sup>1</sup> the development of a racially-themed browser is not qualitatively different from, but rather an extension of, the racially targeted marketing facilitated by drop-down menus and clickable boxes. What these racially themed technologies set in relief is the vast universe of the Internet that remains racially 'unmarked' as not racialized, and therefore universal. These technologies emerge from an industry with a particular and specific history as it relates to race.

***Tech Industry.*** Race is built into the tech industry. Many of the technological advances that gave rise to the Internet and Internet studies were originally developed in Northern California, much of it in and around the Palo Alto Research Center (PARC). Those technological innovations made possible the rise in a new industrial sector centered in the Santa Clara Valley area dubbed 'Silicon Valley.' Scholars working in this area note that while the industry and the Valley touts itself as 'diverse' in web advertisements, the reality is much different (Pitti, 2004). The industry, like the region, carries with it the inequalities of race, class, and gender of the broader social context in which it resides. The tech firms in Silicon Valley are predominantly led by white men and a few white women, yet the manual labor of assembling circuit boards is done by immigrants and outsourced labor, often women living in the global south (Gajjala, 2002; Hossfeld, 2001; Pitti, 2004; Shih, 2006). These inequalities are often also resisted in important ways by and through networks based on race, class and gender. Shih's work, for example, compares the

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work experiences of immigrant Asian men and women to native-born white women in the hi-tech industry of Silicon Valley and finds that racial/ethnic *and* gender bias are actually ameliorated by the fact that highly skilled workers cultivate gender-based and ethnic-based networks as resources that enable them to circumvent bias (Shih, 2006:200). This sort of navigation around bias speaks to the human capacity for resilience in the face of discrimination, yet it does little to shift the overarching structure of the tech industry.

The lack of diversity in the tech industry remains a serious issue. In an investigation that began in 2011 and continued into 2013, CNNMoney probed 20 of the most influential U.S. technology companies, using the Department of Labor statistics, and difficult to obtain information from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), filing two Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for workforce diversity data. What little data these investigative journalists were able to uncover confirm that racial/ethnic minorities (and white women) are generally underrepresented, particularly in management roles, in tech industry firms (Pepitone, 2013). Further attempts to investigate the racial diversity of Silicon Valley firms through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests have been stonewalled by the firms that do not want to release the data and by the EEOC, which claims that it is prohibited by law from releasing the data (Pepitone, 2013).

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Given this context, it is ironic that Mark Zuckerberg (CEO of Facebook) and a cadre of white male technology elites, including Bill Gates, Ron Conway, Reid Hoffman, and Sean Parker have positioned themselves as proponents of immigration reform. The group Fwd.us (<http://www.fwd.us/>) was founded by Zuckerberg and has two affiliate groups – the Council for American Job Growth and Americans for a Conservative Direction - which are used as vehicles to push both parties toward Fwd.us goal of immigration reform. In early 2014, one of the affiliate groups, the Council for American Job Growth, spent \$500,000 on a television ad to run in all 50 states with the message that promotes Immigration reform as a bi-partisan legislative imperative (Wilhelm, 2014). What such a platform allows the technology elites to do is advocate for a kind of reform that would benefit their industry and an elite group of highly educated, middle-class immigrants, consistent with the mythology of the U.S. as a land of opportunity and thus eschewing charges of bias in hiring and promotion. This legislative lobbying effort stands in contrast to the reality of continued stalling on efforts to provide data on current race/ethnicity in employment at technology firms.

***Theorizing the Web.*** Given the concentration of the tech industry in one geographic region, it is not surprising that a particular set of social and cultural commentators emerged within and around this *milieu* and shaped our view of cyber culture. In many ways, contemporary theorizing about the web in the U.S. can trace its roots to John Perry Barlow, a retired Wyoming cattle rancher, a former lyricist for the

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Grateful Dead, and a co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation is a widely known critic of regulating the Internet. Barlow is the author of *A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace*,<sup>2</sup> an influential essay, written in the polemical style of a manifesto and declaring the Internet a place that should remain free from control by "Governments of the Industrial World," which he refers to as "weary giants of flesh and steel." In that essay Barlow also writes that "we," by that he meant those people online in 1996, would "create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace. May it be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before." Barlow variously describes himself as an anarchist<sup>3</sup> or cyberlibertarian<sup>4</sup> and believes that government should have no power over the Internet and that the "...only thing that is dangerous is the one that is designed to stop the free flow of information."

Barlow's view is acclaimed<sup>5</sup> and one shared at that time by most of the leading writers and thinkers about cyberculture<sup>6</sup> in the United States. Cyberlibertarians like John Perry Barlow view the Internet and regulation as antithetical to principles of freedom in cyberspace and in the U.S. constitution. The cyberlibertarian view holds that "a select number of essential freedoms – including freedom of speech – are understood to be absolute, and not negotiable or subject to being balanced" (Nemes, 2002, p.193).

Critics outside the U.S., such as Richard Barbrook, have argued that beyond the "techno-mysticism" (for example in Barlow's *Manifesto*) is a legitimating ideology for a nineteenth century form of nasty, brutish capitalism. Barbrook argues that

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those who share this perspective envision the Internet as a sort of unregulated marketplace usually found only in economics textbooks. Barbrook (with Cameron) writes, "Instead of supporting a caring society, they hope that technological progress into the twenty-first century will inevitably lead back to nineteenth century "tooth-and-claw" capitalism."<sup>7</sup> While Barbrook's critique errs in its hyperbole, the cyberlibertarian view of free speech does support an analogous cyberlibertarian model of business that is peculiar to a specific geographic, temporal, social and cultural context. The cyberlibertarian view of the Internet is one rooted in a particular American geography imbued with a frontier ethos, tied to both a free-market analysis of the Internet and to a very recent (mis)reading of the First Amendment as an absolute protection of all speech (For a more thorough critique of the First Amendment and race, see Chapter 9, *Cyber Racism*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

### **INTERNET FANTASIES, 1994 AND NOW**

The fantasy that the Internet is a color-blind technology is a pervasive one. In 1994, Microsoft began a \$100 million global advertising initiative with the tag line, "Where do you want to go today?" meant to offer a "winsome, humanistic approach" to technology. In 1997, the now-defunct telecom company MCI ran a commercial that heralded the Internet as a "*place where there is no gender, no race, no infirmity,*" ending with the rhetorical question, "*Is this a great time or what?*"

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While the vision of the 1990s Internet as either a vehicle that can take you to any destination or, to mix the metaphor, as a destination without gender, race or infirmity may be laughable now, there are vestigial elements of these fantasies that remain.

The notion of Internet as either vehicle or destination has been replaced by the current fantasy of the Internet is as an ideal, elite workplace with limitless potential and where gender, race and infirmity have no significance. Take for example, the popular Hollywood film, "The Internship," (2013), a comedy starring Vince Vaughn and Owen Wilson (also co-written and co-produced by Vaughn). The film is set almost entirely at Google headquarters, known as Googleplex, just outside of San Jose, California, in the heart of Silicon Valley. The two lead characters Billy and Nick, played by Vaughn and Wilson, are unemployed watch salesmen, no longer economically viable as purveyors of that old technology, "torpedoed by the digital age" the advertisement for the film reads. In an attempt to make them employable in the new economic reality of the digital age, Billy and Nick (Vaughn and Wilson) finagle their way into an internship that is also a competition for an elite job at the Internet firm. Of course, Billy and Nick are white and they are team leaders. They are surrounded by minor characters that are two-dimensional stereotypes: Mr. Cheety (Aasif Mandvi), the humorless Indian-American supervisor; Neha (Tiya Sircar), the hypersexualized Indian-American girl; and, Yo-Yo (Tobit Raphael), a Filipino-American boy who was homeschooled by his overbearing Asian mother.

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Yet, neither Billy nor Nick's whiteness, nor the race or gender of the surrounding characters is ever mentioned, acknowledged, or dealt with except as the punch line of the occasional racist joke. In the end, Billy and Nick rally their multiethnic team to win the competition and jobs for them all at Google. The 2013 film holds within it both the ethos of the 1994 Microsoft ad, "*Where do you want to go today?*" – I want to go work at Google, of course – as well as the 1997 MCI ad, "*Here, there is no gender, no race, no infirmity*" – these may exist, but they don't matter inside the Googleplex. As the film ends, Billy and Nick are no longer "torpedoed" by the digital age, but part of it, and naturally within the logic of white supremacy, leaders in this new era and adored, worshiped even, by their diverse staff. At the very least, the film is an indicator of the triumph of the *Googlization* of everything, that is, the remarkable power of this one company to set agendas and alter perceptions due to the dominance of its search engine as the primary lens through which we experience both the local and the global (Vaidhyathan, 2012). The hagiography of the firm Google in the film "The Internship" also affirms color-blind racism as a core value in contemporary fantasies of the Internet.

### **RACE, TECHNOLOGY & SILICON VALLEY:**

#### ***"My brain database doesn't see skin color"***

The illusion of a color-blind Internet is deeply rooted and pervades discussions about technology. Michael Arrington, the founder of TechCrunch a technology news service, started what some called "Silicon Valley's Diversity Brawl," with his remark,

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*“I don’t know a single black entrepreneur,”* in the fall of 2011. Arrington said this in the context of an interview with Soledad O’Brien for the CNN series, “Black in America 4,” which originally aired November 13, 2011, about the difficulties facing black entrepreneurs. When Arrington’s remarks generated substantial criticism, he defended himself in a blog post saying: *“My brain database doesn’t see skin color.”* Arrington is not an outlier, but rather typical of a technology industry insider. His remarks are indicative of the ethos of the Silicon Valley-based tech industry that operates within a framework of color-blind racism.

Another industry insider who became embroiled in the “Diversity Brawl” of 2011 was tech entrepreneur and journalist Jason Calcanis. Incensed by the accusation that the tech industry contained bias, Calcanis wrote this on Twitter:

*“Do Tumblr, Wordpress or SquareSpace see color, gender or age? I think not. There is nothing stopping anyone from starting a blog.”*

Following that, he got more specific and said:

*“If you want to break into tech journalism, you only need to blog everyday for three years. There isn’t a race wall in tech.”*

Calcanis then took to the longer form and wrote on his blog, in a post entitled, “Doing the Right Things,” he wrote:

*“You can sit there and look backwards at the racist old-world, or you can look forward and create the new post-race world.”*

Calcanis, like Arrington, is a technology industry insider and is giving voice to a commonly held set of views about race rooted in color-blindness. Central to this set

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of beliefs is that "there is no race wall" in the technology industry. In fact, I would argue that this is a core value of the technology industry, a desire to believe that there is "no race wall" because it helps sustain an analogous set of beliefs about their own white racial innocence and blamelessness in a racially unequal society. When this core value is set in relief against the statistics about the industry, there is a notable contrast between the fantasy of color-blindness and the reality of racial inequality. Among tech startups, only about 1% of entrepreneurs who receive venture capital are black, the vast majority are white men. The overwhelming whiteness of those who secure venture capital and then go on to become industry leaders calls into question the notion of a level playing field in the tech industry. Such questioning makes people like Arrington and Calcanis angry, I would argue, because it calls into question their own racial innocence and the basis for their achievements. The tech industry, as the "Diversity Brawl" illustrates, must deal with a deeply rooted color-blind racism.

### **THEORIZING THE WEB THROUGH A COLOR-BLIND LENS**

Popular and scholarly attempts to understand the Internet are similarly situated within a framework of color-blindness. There is a burgeoning field of popular writers and intellectuals who stand outside traditional boundaries of academic careers (though some hold adjunct positions at universities) and are making a living by writing and hosting conferences about the Internet. These popular efforts to make sense of the web sit alongside more traditional scholar attempts at theorizing

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the web. Yet, whether popular or scholarly, such attempts seem willfully blind to the importance of race or to the ongoing significance of racism in understanding the Internet. Evidence for this claim can be found on the program of virtually every technology conference and in the index of popular Internet books. Each spring, the rock-and-roll-themed South by Southwest Interactive (SxSWi) conference attracts the leading figures in the Internet industry and in the meta-world of writing about the Internet to Austin, Texas. In 2009, SxSWi featured a panel with the title "Can Social Media End Racism?" but there has not been a similar session since then. This, at least in part, reflects the tastes and choices of the conference attendees. At SxSWi, participants vote ahead of time to select which panels they deem worthy of inclusion in the line up. That there has not been another panel on racism at SxSWi indicates that there is little interest in the topic among participants. In this regard, SxSWi is typical of other technology conferences. As I noted in previous research about women's blogging conferences, when race is not foregrounded as central, then race is ignored (Author, 2012).

Another indicator, by no means meant to be comprehensive, is a review of popular book titles about the Internet. A quick search of some of the most widely cited titles for the mention of "race OR racism" reveals how rarely these terms are mentioned: Seth Godin, *Tribes*, (0 mentions); Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, (3 mentions, "race and class do matter" Chapter 1); Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, Kenneth Cukier, *Big Data*, (0 mentions); Siva Vaidhyanatha, *Googlization of Everything*, (0 mentions);

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Ethan Zuckerman, *Rewire*, (1 mention, about racial patterns in use of Foursquare in which Zuckerman is quick to point out that the white man he is discussing "is not racist" p.213-4); Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, (1 mention, to the first-person shooter game Quake and "a race called the Vadrigar," p.219). The issue here is not the racial bias of these individual authors, nor even their color-blind lens; rather, my point here is that the Internet itself, as a subject worth writing about, is seen as set apart from the subject of race. If one is going to write about the Internet, there is no need to take up the issue of race (or racism), the thinking seems to go.

For the most part, the burden of noticing race on the Internet has been left to 'minority participants,' that is, to researchers who are people of color. The 'spectacle of the Other' has had profound implications on the field of race and Internet studies in two ways: 1) race as a 'variable' and, 2) race as 'identity.' Stuart Hall writes that when there are gross inequalities of power these inequities are sustained by 'the spectacle of the Other,' that is gazing at representations of racialized others. Hall goes on to explain that this facilitates a binding together of "all of Us who are 'normal' into one 'imagined community'; and it sends into symbolic exile all of Them - The Others - who are in some way different - beyond the pale" (Hall, 1997, 258). Race in Internet studies has not escaped this gaze.

Zuberi (2001) deconstructs the logic behind the use of race as a variable in quantitative social science and argues that race has been misused as a causal

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variable. Separated from social context, race as a discrete cause of some social phenomenon is problematic because it conflates correlation with causality (Zuberi, 2001, 97). This leads, somewhat inevitably, to a deficit model in which those "with race" (those who are not white) are perpetually found lacking (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Within Internet studies, this is most evident in research on the digital divide in which most digital divide rhetoric depicts a world where 'undereducated, under motivated and underemployed minorities are competing against technologically sophisticated whites' (Jenkins, 2002)<sup>8</sup>. This view is what Everett refers to a 'master narrative' that positions 'black people in general, and black women especially, as casualties of the information economy' (Everett, 2004:1282).<sup>9</sup> This is not merely the disabling rhetoric of those outside the field, but it inheres in the very definition of the digital divide. As Gunkel (2003) points out the fact that this research takes as its premise a dichotomous variable replays a broader binary opposition within Western culture such as 'literate' and 'illiterate.' He goes on to note that not only is this binary unable to represent something that essentially resists division into a simple either/or dichotomy, but also institutes an asymmetrical hierarchy (2003, 516). The dichotomous variable of technology 'haves' versus 'have-nots' is said to be caused by the variable race. Once these variable terms and putative causal relationships are set in place, it becomes difficult to see beyond these to envision race in social context. Nakamura is able to bring social context back in to the discussion of the digital divide in her examination of studies which habitually characterize Asian and Asian American Internet users as

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'the most wired group in America.' Yet, such descriptors obfuscate the rather glaring methodological flaw that routinely excludes the significant portion<sup>10</sup> of Asian Americans who speak little or no English and are thus not included in the random-sample surveys that purport to measure the digital divide. Language that dubs Asian Americans 'the most wired' group in America deceptively represents them 'as honorary or approximate whites in a way that obscures their actual oppression and position as material labor base rather than as privileged consumers of Internet- and IT-based services and media' (Nakamura, 2008, p.179). Thus, whether the disabling rhetoric of blacks and Latinos as on the 'wrong side' of a dichotomous divide or the obscuring language of Asian Americans as 'most wired,' conceptualizing race as a causal variable in Internet studies replays the spectacle of the Other, while reaffirming whites and whiteness as normative.

Racial identity online continues to be seen as a 'discovery' within a supposedly race-free setting. The early focus in the literature on race and the Internet (Burkhalter, 1999) evoked the language of exploration and discovery (e.g., 'discovering racial identity in a Usenet group'). This rhetoric was consistent with then-current descriptions of the Internet as an 'electronic frontier' and suggests the gaze of the colonizer. Today, studies that purport to 'discover' race have mostly been eclipsed by research on racial identity online that is tied more closely to traditions of resilience and resistance. As Kravnsny and Igwe point out, for African Americans, racial identity is part of a longstanding struggle against white domination marked

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by slavery, segregation, the great migration, the civil rights movement, and the black power movement (Kravnsny and Igwe, 2008, p.570). Scholarship has shown that people seek out online spaces premised upon valences of racial identity whether at Blackplanet.com or AsianAmerican.net (Byrne, 2008). Yet, when the scholarship on racial identity is viewed in the broader context of the field of Internet studies, a field that is silent on that longstanding struggle and generally unaware of white domination, it takes on a different valance. Viewed from the latter vantage point, the excellent work on racial identity is marked as outside the central theoretical concerns of the field, and is left to "minority participants" to give voice to their experience of racial identity in cyberspace. In other words, they are asked to perform the spectacle of the Other about the experience of people of color online and off.

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

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***"I would prefer not to" (Notice Race).*** Like Melville's *Bartleby*, the scholars studying the Internet "would prefer not to" notice race. When those early participants on the web contended that it was "color-blind" what they really meant, according to Henry Jenkins was "that they desperately wanted a place where they didn't have to think about, look at or talk about racial differences" (Jenkins, 2002). The longing to avoid having to 'think about, look at, or talk about racial differences,' is endemic to contemporary whiteness (Delgado and Stefancic, 1997; Rasmussen, et al., 2001). The desire to find a "place" without any discussion of race is also a key mechanism of color-blind racism.

This avoidance of race and racism is not unique to the field of Internet studies. A number of scholars have pointed out the resistance to critically analyzing racism within social science (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi, 2001; Feagin, 2010; Steinberg, 2007; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008) and the field of Internet studies seems to share that reluctance. As I have written elsewhere, notable scholars in the field are surprised when they encounter race and racism online (Author, 2013). This response is similar to the ones encountered by Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva when presenting research findings about racism and who meet resistance from those that insist on finding 'anything but racism' to explain such findings (2008, pp. 4-15). Of the small portion of Internet studies research that do take up the issue of race, the vast majority focuses on some aspect of racial identity, while only a small portion

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focuses on everyday expressions of racism on the Internet (e.g., Harris, et al. 2001; Steinfeldt, et al, 2010; Tynes and Markoe, 2010).

The lack of attention to racism in the field is partly attributable to the fact that the field of race and Internet studies remains undertheorized. Nakamura has called for greater theoretical attention to contemporary constellation of racism, globalization and technoculture in which the Internet is implicated in and she suggests that this constellation is undertheorized (2006, p.30). To address this need for theory, some scholars have turned to *racial formation theory* (Omi and Winant, 1994). However, I contend that this is, for the most part, an unfortunate theoretical turn for the field of Internet studies because it offers little help in theorizing racism, either overt or color-blind (Feagin and Elias, 2013). Within the racial formation framework, race is constructed by the State, but racism exists at the individual level and is defined as 'a set of erratic beliefs that may lead racist actors to develop "attitudes" (prejudice) against the group(s) they conceive as inferior, which may ultimately lead them to "act" (discriminate) against the stereotyped group(s)' (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi, 2008, p.138). In race and Internet studies this means that researchers design studies to measure individual levels of racial *prejudice* associated with particular Internet practices (e.g., Evans, et al., 2003; Melican and Dixon, 2008). Research that uses attitudinal surveys to distinguish between those who are 'biased' and those who are 'unbiased' individualizes the problem of racism by keeping out more structural views (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi, 2008, p.138). Such a framework also

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situates color-blind racism at the individual level rather than placing it at the structural level. Ultimately, understanding the complicated connections between color-blind racism, globalization and technoculture in which the Internet is implicated requires a more robust theoretical framework.

***Choosing to See Whiteness.*** Stuart Hall refers to an 'imagined community' in which those who are 'normal' are bound together, separated from those who are marked by difference. On the Internet, and in Internet studies, this 'imagined community' is constituted by whiteness, as I have written about elsewhere (Author, 2013).

Sociologist W.E.B. DuBois remains among the most astute scholars of whiteness (2003/1920). An early observer of the Internet, Kali Tal, urged researchers to draw on DuBois for theorizing about race and whiteness. Tal opens her 1996 piece in *Wired* with an epigraph from DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* and goes on to write: 'I have long suspected that the much vaunted 'freedom' to shed the 'limiting' markers of race and gender on the Internet is illusory, and that in fact it masks a more disturbing phenomenon—the whitinizing of cyberspace' (Tal, 1996). Brock continues in DuBois' theoretical tradition when he writes, 'To the extent that cultural values are transmitted through Internet content, we can draw on DuBois' observations about Black and White culture to evaluate Internet content' (2006, p.364). Brock describes DuBois' view that white culture was forged in the legacy of slavery and the bond among whites continues to be reified in ways that justify social control of Blacks, as well as sustain discriminatory practices and beliefs (Brock,

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2006, p.363). Tara McPherson brings theoretical sophistication to the study of whiteness online in her examination of neo-conservatives in the southern U.S. (McPherson, 2003; 2000). McPherson argues that notions about the South often map onto tropes about southern hospitality and the southern (white) lady. She contends that these discursive constructions tend to conceal and disavow hard historical truths; particularly about the myriad ways that systematic racism scaffolds whiteness, southern-ness, and femininity.

The work of scholars interrogating whiteness in Internet studies (e.g., Bernardi, Brock, Kendall, Leonard, McPherson, White) point the way forward and illustrate that there has been some interest in reversing the gaze, yet this is not well developed within Internet studies. Part of what is needed here, I contend, is a strong theoretical framework that acknowledges the persistence of racism online while simultaneously recognizing the deep roots of racial inequality in existing social structures that shape technoculture. An important contribution here is Feagin's recent work that extends the insights of DuBois through the analytical framework of systemic racism (2013a) and the white racial frame (2013b). Taking the long view of white Americans' interactions with and treatment of people of color's articulation of systemic racism includes the many exploitative and discriminatory practices of whites, the unjustly gained resources, and the power for whites demonstrated in the hierarchy linking "race" and material well-being, the many racial images and narratives that fall under the umbrella of the white racial

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frame (Feagin and Elias, 2013; Feagin 2013b; Bonilla-Silva 1997). Throughout this long socio-historical development, he argues, a powerful white racial frame has been established that reinforces and perpetuates the beliefs and practices of systemic racism. The implication from this for future research that seeks to address race and racism on the Internet is that we must resist the longing for a color-blind Internet and eschew a white-framed field of Internet studies.

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

### **CONCLUSION**

There are three interconnected circuits of color-blind racism and the Internet. The first is a fantasy seen in the 1990s advertisements that promise a world of limitless possibilities ("*where do you want to go today?*") and of a destination without barriers ("*here, there is no gender, no race, no infirmity*"). This 1990s fantasy has been re-cast in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century in popular culture depictions of Google headquarters, aka the Googleplex, as both the means and final destination of limitless possibilities, where white men lead racially diverse work teams in perfect, color-blind harmony.

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The fantasy that the Internet is a color-blind technology is a persistent one that pervades the second circuit examined here: the tech industry. As tech journalists and entrepreneurs Mike Arrington and Jason Calcanis reveal in their statements in the "Diversity Brawl" in Silicon Valley in 2011, sparked by a CNN reporter asking about race. One of the statements by Calcanis said, "*Do Tumblr, Wordpress or SquareSpace see color, gender or age? I think not,*" seems to echo the 1990s commercial blurring the line between the color-blind fantasies of the Internet and the reality racial inequality in the tech industry. The illusion of a color-blind Internet is deeply rooted and continues to pervade discussions about technology by industry insiders. At the same time, elites in the tech industry - led by Facebook CEO Zuckerberg - push for immigration reforms that benefit their industry and an elite group of highly educated, mostly middle-class immigrants. Such reform efforts are consistent with a color-blind ideology and the mythology of the U.S. as a land of opportunity for all.

The third circuit is the way color-blind racism shapes popular understandings of the Internet. At technology conferences such as SxSWi, race and racism are rarely mentioned and only occasionally get "voted up" by participants for inclusion. In writing for a general audience, books that are intended to help explain the Internet seldom include a mention of race or racism. My argument here is twofold: both that 'race' is only seen to inhere in the bodies of those racialized Others, and that the subject of the Internet itself is viewed as raceless. If race is little mentioned within

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this color-blind frame, then racism is almost non-existent. Like Melville's *Bartleby*, the popular writers discussing the Internet "would prefer not to" notice race, and thus engage in one of the key mechanisms of color-blind racism.

The mechanisms of color-blind racism are interwoven in fantasies of the Internet as a raceless utopia that exist alongside the realities of racial inequality in the tech industry. The reality of racial inequality in the tech industry is also largely ignored in the popular and academic writing that seeks to explain the web to a broad audience. Thus, the color-blind racism implicit in theorizing the web-without-race serves as a mechanism to legitimate the racial inequality of the tech industry. What we need instead of fantasies about a color-blind Internet is a more richly informed understanding of the way that technoculture and the tech industry have been and continue to be shaped by a every day practices of color-blind racism that systematically obscures the articulation of race.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, this discussion at the popular technology site TechCrunch following the announcement of the release of *Blackbird*:

<http://techcrunch.com/2008/12/08/blackbird-is-a-custom-browser-for-african-americans-built-on-top-of-mozilla/> .

<sup>2</sup> John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," February 8, 1996. <<http://homes.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> Roshni Jayakar, "What Stops Free Flow of Information is Dangerous," *Business Today*, Living Media India, December 6, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Goldsmith and Wu, 2006, 17.

<sup>5</sup> The acclaim for his views is evident in his recent appointment as a Fellow at one of the nation's most prestigious institutions, Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society.

<sup>6</sup> There is a long list of names that could go here, but most notable critics of the regulation of the Internet include Mike Godwin, Lawrence Lessing, and Howard Rheingold.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, "The California Ideology: A Critique of West Coast Cyber-Libertarianism," Originally published in *Very Cyber*, May 1996.

<<http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/theory-californianideology.html>>.

<sup>8</sup> To be clear, Jenkins here is critical of this view of the digital divide.

<sup>9</sup> Michelle Wright comes to a similar conclusion: 'The reality is that technology is the product of ten thousand years of world civilizations, of which African civilizations were a

central contributor, and African Americans have been regular contributors, from ironing boards to cell phones. The reality of the digital divide, I concluded, bore an uncanny and disturbing resemblance to racist beliefs about race and technology' (Wright, 2005: 29).

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Nakamura writes that "69 percent of Asian-Americans who speak little or no English" (2008, p. 179), but this figure seems too high when compared to U.S. Census data. The Census Bureau finds that 47% of Asian/Pacific Islanders who spoke a language other than English speak English "less than very well" and 23.3% do not speak any language other than English in the home (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/acs-22.pdf>). Still, Nakamura's larger point that notions of Asian Americans as "model minority" users of technology overlooks the vast diversity within and among people from many cultures who are grouped together under this one category.