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Jessie Daniels
CUNY Hunter College

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Cloaked websites: propaganda, cyber-racism and epistemology in the digital era

JESSIE DANIELS

Hunter College, City University of New York, USA

Abstract

This article analyzes cloaked websites, which are sites published by individuals or groups who conceal authorship in order to disguise deliberately a hidden political agenda. Drawing on the insights of critical theory and the Frankfurt School, this article examines the way in which cloaked websites conceal a variety of political agendas from a range of perspectives. Of particular interest here are cloaked white supremacist sites that disguise cyber-racism. The use of cloaked websites to further political ends raises important questions about knowledge production and epistemology in the digital era. These cloaked sites emerge within a social and political context in which it is increasingly difficult to parse fact from propaganda, and this is a particularly pernicious feature when it comes to the cyber-racism of cloaked white supremacist sites. The article concludes by calling for the importance of critical, situated political thinking in the evaluation of cloaked websites.

Key words

cloaked • cyber-racism • epistemology • propaganda • racist • white supremacist

INTRODUCTION

Shortly after the biopolitical disaster that followed Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 (Giroux, 2006; Lavelle and Feagin, 2006) a wide constellation of websites with domain names such as Katrina Families (www.katrinafamilies.com) and Parish Donations (www.parishdonations.com) appeared, featuring digital photos of distressed people in the flooded Gulf Coast region. Beyond the digital photographs featuring only white people, the sites contained no overtly white supremacist or racist rhetoric and appeared to be legitimate appeals to help people in the devastated coastal area. Web traffic to those sites was redirected to Internet Donations.org (www.internetdonations.org), which also appeared to be a rather generic site, except for that the fact that the domain name was registered to Frank Weltner, a St Louis, MO-based white supremacist. The State of Missouri sued Weltner, a member of the neo-Nazi National Alliance, in September 2005 for violating state fundraising law and for 'omitting the material fact that the ultimate company behind the defendants' websites supports white supremacy' (Zeller, 2005; see also Anti-Defamation League, 2005). Weltner's Katrina-related sites are no longer on the internet because of the prohibition in Missouri's fundraising law, but he continues to maintain a number of other websites, including overtly anti-Semitic Jew Watch (www.jewwatch.com) and the cloaked site American Civil Rights Review (www.americancivilrightsreview.com).

The emergence of websites such as Weltner's Katrina Families and American Civil Rights Review illustrates a central feature of propaganda and cyber-racism in the digital era: the use of difficult-to-detect authorship and hidden agendas intended to accomplish political goals, including white supremacy. Cyber-racism, a term coined by Les Back (2002), refers to a range of white supremacist movements in Europe and North America, as well as to the way in which the internet and digital media open new horizons for the expression of 'whiteness' across national boundaries. Propaganda, the deliberate attempt to shape perceptions, thoughts and behavior in order to further the desired goal of the propagandist (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2006), takes on new features in the digital era while retaining many of previous eras. The use of propaganda to achieve political goals, both fascist and democratic, is neither new nor unique to digital media (Conason, 2003; Corn, 2003; George, 1959). In a 1951 essay about American propaganda, Adorno critiques the manipulation inherent in both advertising and propaganda when he writes that propaganda has 'by now come to be a profession' that relies on consumer psychology in which propagandists 'test the effectiveness of its various appeals', and only the catchiest ones survive (Adorno, 2002[1951]: 151). While Adorno was writing about another era and a different medium (broadcast media), valuable insights from his work are relevant for understanding the emergence of cloaked websites. Cloaked websites contain

elements that resonate with the consumer psychology and the test-marketed appeals that Adorno alerted us to half a century ago. Indeed, part of what makes cloaked sites potentially so effective as propaganda is that often they are difficult to distinguish from advertising and other forms of persuasion online.

CLOAKED WEBSITES

Cloaked websites, especially those that disguise cyber-racism, represent a particular kind of epistemological challenge: that is, these sites call into question the basis of what we say we know about ethnicity, racism and racial equality. Yet, there is very little in the scholarly literature about hidden racist propaganda online, although there is a growing literature on overt racist propaganda online (e.g. Adams and Roscigno, 2005; Atton, 2006; Back et al., 1996; Kaplan et al., 2003; Levin, 2002; Smith, 2002; Stern, 2002[2001]; Whine, 1999; Zickmund, 1997). On the one hand, although some writers have expressed concern that unsuspecting internet users are in danger of being recruited into white supremacist groups through overt racist websites (e.g. Gerstenfeld et al., 2003; Lamberg, 2001; Mock, 2000), this concern fails to take into account the fact that the user must seek out this specific kind of website (Best, 2004; Delgado and Stefancic, 2004). Cloaked white supremacist sites, on the other hand, are encountered easily and often using popular search engines such as Google to look for information on civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King (Daniels, 2007, 2008).

This article defines cloaked websites as those published by individuals or groups that conceal authorship or feign legitimacy in order to deliberately disguise a hidden political agenda. The use of the term 'cloaked' to refer to a website appeared for the first time in Ray and Marsh's (2001) article, in which the authors refer to Martin Luther King: A True Historical Examination (www.martinlutherking.org) as a 'cloaked site'. Here, the term 'cloaked website' is adopted and expanded to include other types of sites. While this author recognizes that others have used the terms 'counterfeit', 'hoax' and 'urban legend' to refer to some of these sites (e.g. Piper, 2000), such terms lack a conceptual clarity and miss the key element of a hidden political agenda. In this expanded definition of cloaked websites, this article includes 'pseudo-scientific' websites that feign legitimacy to advance their goals (e.g. Institute for Historical Review, www.ihr.org; or The Rosetta Foundation, www.teenbreaks.com). Cloaked websites are similar to previous versions of print and electronic media propaganda in which the authorship, source or intention of a publication or broadcast is obscured (Cull et al., 2003; Jowett and O'Donnell, 2006). In a study of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary electronic communication using radio, Soley and Nichols (1986) distinguish between three types of propaganda:

- 1 'white' propaganda, in which stations openly identify themselves (e.g. Radio Free Europe);
- 2 'grey' propaganda, in which stations are operated purportedly by dissident groups within a country, although actually they might be located in another nation (e.g. the supposedly anti-Castro 'La Voz del CID'; Frederick, 1986); and
- 3 'black' propaganda stations, which transmit broadcasts by one side disguised as broadcasts by another (e.g. the 'Lord Haw-Haw' broadcasts of the English voice of Nazi Germany; Doherty, 1994).¹

While the crudely color-coded designations of 'white', 'grey' and 'black' are problematic linguistic constructions for the way in which they reinscribe racial connotations, the distinctions drawn by these conceptualizations are useful for understanding cloaked websites. As with radio broadcasts or printed media, websites can be used to advance the goals of propagandists, and propaganda in the digital era shares many of the features of that in previous media eras. Many websites representing a range of political viewpoints deploy the strategy of 'white' propaganda in which they clearly identify their authorship, affiliation and intended political purpose (e.g. MoveOn.org, www.moveon.org; or Stormfront, www.stormfront.org; for a comparison of these two, see Hara and Estrada, 2005). There has been a good deal of scholarly attention to the use of the internet to advance clearly declared political agendas by easily identifiable authors from marginalized subcultures (Castells, 1997; Kahn and Kellner, 2003, 2004), and generally, scholars have lauded because of the participatory aspect of these efforts in the face of the large, corporate monopolies controlling the media (Jenkins, 2006b; Kahn and Kellner, 2003, 2004; Langman, 2005). Organizations and individuals who deploy the strategies of 'black' and 'grey' propaganda online via cloaked websites can be more effective precisely because they conceal their intention and authorship (Fogg, 2003; Stauber and Rampton, 1995). To date, relatively little has been written about websites that intentionally conceal, disguise or obfuscate their authorship, or feign legitimacy in order to advance a political agenda (Daniels, 2007, 2008). This research is intended as an initial step toward addressing this gap in knowledge.

Cloaked websites are not the exclusive purview of white supremacists; such sites disguise any number of political agendas including, but not limited to, cyber-racism. This article begins by exploring a number of examples of cloaked websites that disguise a broad range of political agendas and situating them within the study of propaganda more generally. Within this wide spectrum of political agendas promulgated online through cloaked websites are those that advocate cyber-racism and seek to advance the cause of white supremacy by undermining the value of racial equality. The following section

continues the analysis of cloaked websites by examining the specific instance of cyber-racism disguised by cloaked white supremacist sites. These sites are one variation of the broad category of cloaked sites, and an especially pernicious variant given the social context of the post-civil rights era in which they emerge. Then, the article turns to the epistemological challenge that these sites represent in the digital era, in which gatekeepers such as editors, publishers or broadcasters no longer completely mediate entrance into the marketplace of ideas. Finally, it speculates on some of the political implications of cloaked sites, and concludes with a return to Adorno's critique of advertising and propaganda.

Concealing a variety of political agendas

Cloaked websites can and do conceal a variety of political agendas. Perhaps the most widely known example of a cloaked site is that of www.gwbush.com,² which was set up in the early days of Bush's first presidential campaign. The activist group behind this project, known collectively as @TMark, in collaboration with two other activists known as 'The Yes Men', have views that would be considered on the far Left of the American political landscape. @TMark is interested primarily in drawing attention to the system of corporate power and challenging the legal convention in the USA of corporate personhood; 'The Yes Men' are anti-globalization activists (Meikle, 2002).³ This cloaked site was very effective in getting attention and fooling web users, in part because of the clever use of a domain name similar to the official campaign's uniform resource locator (URL), and in part because it used the same graphics as the official website. In the days after its initial launch, a number of reporters were taken in by the site and phoned the Bush campaign to ask for clarification on policy issues (Meikle, 2002). Bush and his campaign advisors strenuously objected to the site, going so far as to issue a cease-and-desist letter to its creators and file a complaint with the Federal Election Committee (Meikle, 2002). It was in response to this cloaked site that George W. Bush twice remarked 'there ought to be limits to freedom' (Meikle, 2002: 118). While the website was referred to in mainstream press accounts as a 'spoof' or 'hoax' (and even by its creators as a 'parody'), these terms elide the pointed political message that motivated the creation of the site. One of the ironies here is that, the cloaked website was arguably more engaged with actual political issues, such as corporate responsibility and the 'War on Drugs', than the official Bush campaign site (Meikle, 2002).

In addition to the cloaked Bush campaign site, The Yes Men have created a number of other cloaked sites in keeping with their anti-globalization activism, including www.gatt.org, which appears to be the site for the World Trade Organization (WTO). The website features a logo that is identical to the actual WTO logo appearing on the official WTO website. The structure

and layout of the two sites are very similar – there is no indication that The Yes Men are behind the cloaked site or that it is meant to be a critique of the globalization policies of the WTO. On the top right corner of the website is a link that reads ‘Contact Us’, which activates an email address that goes to the creators. The cloaked site has duped a number of people, including the organizers of an academic forum on globalization who used the email address linked from the cloaked site to unwittingly invite one of The Yes Men to speak, assuming that they were WTO officials. In their appearance at the forum, The Yes Men deployed a number of additional forms of deception to engage in their particular brand of culture-jamming political theater, but it is the cloaked website that provided the cornerstone for these other deceptions.

On the other side of the political spectrum from The Yes Men and the *®™ark* activists, corporations utilize cloaked websites to counter criticisms of corporate practices and to give the appearance of grass roots support, a practice known as ‘astroturfing’⁴ (Mayer, 2007). In 2006, corporate giant Wal-Mart launched Working Families for Wal-Mart (www.forwalmart.com) and Paid Critics (www.paidcritics.com), two thinly cloaked sites written by Edelman, a public relations firm employed by Wal-Mart (CNN Money, 2006). Through these sites, Wal-Mart launched an aggressive online disinformation campaign after receiving scathing criticisms for its global business practices from a number of sources (Bianco, 2006; Norman, 2004; Quinn, 2000; Spotts, 2005). While even a casual internet user is sure to pick up on the shill-like tone of the corporate rhetoric on this site, nevertheless the company tries to disguise its involvement with text on the ‘About Us’ page: ‘Working Families for Wal-Mart is a group of leaders from a variety of backgrounds and communities all across America’, with the site describing its mission as ‘fostering open and honest dialogue with elected officials, opinion makers and community leaders that conveys the positive contributions of Wal-Mart to working families’ (<http://www.forwalmart.com/about/>). It is deeply ironic, not to mention disingenuous, that a site which describes its mission as fostering ‘honest’ dialogue hides its intention and authorship. Perhaps more brazen here is the second site, which attempts to discredit any critics of Wal-Mart by labeling them ‘paid critics’, when in fact it is Wal-Mart that is paying people to write and publish both sites. This is a profoundly cynical move on the part of Wal-Mart and Edelman which betrays their assumption about the lack of sophistication of Wal-Mart customers, in presuming that they will be duped by the cloaked sites. By establishing these sites, Wal-Mart and Edelman are attempting to manipulate customers into ignoring the criticisms, regarding the company more favorably, and thus continuing to spend money there. Moreover, they are betting that there will be very little resistance.

Cloaked sites are not limited to the USA. Canadian politician Joe Volpe's alleged corruption is the target of a cloaked site intended as political satire. In 2006 Volpe was a liberal member of parliament in Canada, who was campaigning for a leadership position. During his campaign, news reports about illegal campaign donations surfaced. Reporters discovered that illegal donations had been made to Volpe hidden in gifts using the names of several children, including 11-year-old twins who supposedly donated more than \$10,000 each and a 14-year-old who had given another \$5,400. Volpe later said that he would return five illegal contributions made to his campaign. During this controversy, a cloaked site called Youth for Volpe (www.youthforvolpe.blogspot.com),⁵ appeared. The cloaked site, which features images of children who are supposedly pledging donations to Volpe, appeared *sans* authorship. As with Bush and global corporate giant Wal-Mart, Volpe was not amused. Volpe successfully used Canadian laws and his political power to have the initial site shut down, but an additional site has been launched (on US-based Blogspot, www.blogspot.com) which he has not been able to remove.⁶ Whether or not cloaked sites can actually sway an election or influence consumers remains an open question. Still, these three examples suggest that powerful politicians and corporations clearly see both danger and opportunity in cloaked sites. Politicians worry that their lack of control over cloaked sites which are not of their own creation could mean a rupture in a highly crafted public persona, influencing constituents to vote against them. Public relations firms try to use cloaked sites to shape public perception of their client corporations in order to influence consumers. In both instances, what is at stake with cloaked sites is managing a public identity;⁷ what is at risk is the potential loss of votes, money and power.

Cloaked websites can conceal hidden political agendas connected to reproductive politics. One example is 'Teen Breaks' (www.teenbreaks.com). This site is very sophisticated in its use of domain name, graphic user interface, professional looking design, layout and moderate sounding rhetoric. To all but the most astute political observer and experienced internet veteran, the site appears to be a legitimate source of reproductive health information for youth. In fact, it is a disguise for pro-life propaganda. Nowhere does the site reveal the political affiliation of the publisher, or even who the publisher is, beyond a vague mention of the 'Rosetta Foundation', which is a front for a pro-life activist.⁸ On a page called 'Complications for Girls', the site quotes literature from the conservative activist group 'Focus on the Family' to support the notion that there are many (and exclusively) negative physical and emotional consequences of abortion that form a so-called 'post-abortion syndrome' (see: <http://www.teenbreaks.com/abortion/complicationsgirls.cfm>). This supposed 'syndrome' is not a medically recognized condition, but rather a rhetorical strategy of the pro-life movement to advance its agenda.

This cloaked site is in many ways a digital version of the bricks-and-mortar 'Women's Health Clinics' advertised in the phone book alongside legitimate clinics, intentionally concealing the fact that all the counselors and information are designed to prevent women from accessing abortion services (Ginsburg, 1998). The danger in a cloaked site of this type, as with the bricks-and-mortar locations, is that young girls or women looking for reliable reproductive health information might be persuaded that 'post-abortion syndrome' is a reality, and that they would endure an unwanted pregnancy and childbirth rather than end a pregnancy for fear of the fictitious syndrome and lack of access to services. The tautological strategy of using conservative sources to substantiate conservative 'facts' is a commonplace tactic of the right-wing propaganda machine in the USA. Indeed, a cottage industry of conservative think-tanks, pundits and writers churning out scientific distortions has emerged to conduct a 'War on the Enlightenment' ideal of rationality (Goldberg, 2006). Whatever one's personal politics might be concerning the right to abortion, the fact that this website presents itself as a neutral source of information and conceals its political agenda qualifies it as a cloaked site for this analysis.

The discussion so far is not meant to be an exhaustive inventory of all cloaked sites currently on the internet; rather, the foregoing is meant to be suggestive of the kind of epistemological challenge posed by evaluating knowledge claims published on a few cloaked sites. Deception is by no means a new political strategy, but some features of the digital era can make it more difficult to discern which sites are legitimate or which sites disguise a hidden political agenda. Of course, designating a site as legitimate or cloaked is at some level a political distinction; similar to labeling some organizations 'front groups' and calling others legitimate social movement activism (Mayer, 2007). On the web, discerning between cloaked sites and legitimate sites is a complex matter that includes elements of internet and media literacy (Jacobson Harris, 2007; Livingstone, 2004), web credibility (Fogg et al., 2002; Metzger and Flanagin, 2007) and critical thinking (Giroux, 2006), including situating the user in relation to the site. These last two, critical thinking and situating the user in relation to the site, involve making decisions with political implications. For example, whether one chooses to send a young female friend looking for information about sexual health to the Teen Breaks site or to Teen Wire (www.teenwire.com), a site published by Planned Parenthood, reflects one's own and the young friend's personal politics. Shying away from such political distinctions in evaluating information online only serves to obfuscate the key issues. To the contrary, the kind of critical consciousness that enables one to make these kinds of judgements possible is needed urgently in the current political milieu in which knowledge – both the production of knowledge and how we validate or dismiss knowledge claims – has become politicized and more complicated in the digital era.

The need for this sort of thinking is particularly necessary when it comes to the racist propaganda of cloaked white supremacist websites.

The cloaked white supremacist websites explored in the rest of this article conceal political agendas intended to subvert civil rights and affirm white supremacy through an audacious deployment of civil rights movement rhetoric. Indeed, a number of these sites deliberately seek to disguise the racism of the authors by using carefully chosen domain names and deceptive graphic user interface. The rhetoric on these kinds of cloaked sites is less strident than that appearing on overt white supremacist sites, and it mimics the language of civil rights, multiculturalism and scholarship in order to deceive.

Cyber-lies, cyber-racism: cloaked white supremacist sites

Frank Weltner, mentioned in the opening of this article, is perhaps most widely known for his overtly anti-Semitic website Jew Watch.⁹ Weltner also maintains the cloaked site American Civil Rights Review. The main page of this site features a blue and red text on a bright yellow background, an audiofile upon loading and inexplicable animated .gifs throughout. Across the top of the main page is an image map: that is, a series of images that also serve as links to other pages within the website. The featured images, from left to right, are a black and white digital photo of Malcolm X (linked to an interior page on ‘Civil Rights Positions’), a digital reproduction of a Currier & Ives painting of a plantation (with a link to a page titled ‘Cotton Plantation by the Mississippi River, High Self-Esteem for Many Slaves’), a black and white digital photo of Che Guevera (with a link to ‘Diversity & Multiculturalism in International Areas’), and a graphic of a sign with stenciled letters that reads ‘St. Louis – No Trespassing – No Loitering’ (with a link to a page ‘St. Louis Home Page’, with further links to pages about the devastation wrought by urban renewal at the hands of housing and urban development). The blue highlighted text above the image map reads ‘American Civil Rights Review’, and the smaller, red text beneath says, ‘Speaking Out For The New Civil Rights Movement’. Below that is another heading in red, ‘Civil Rights/ Human Rights SUPER-NEWS Search’, where visitors can ‘Access Daily Happenings in Major NEWS Sources’. These all link to an external site, the search engine Yahoo!, by the category noted in the linked text. These links all lead to guided and legitimate searches on Yahoo! on a variety of current news items. Without scrolling further down the page, this is all that is visible for most users from most web browsers. If the web user does scroll down (and usability research indicates that very few users scroll all the way to the bottom of a page), the page continues below this where there is more text in blue, headlined with ‘Civil Rights/Human Rights Web Resources on ACRR [americancivilrightsreview.com]’, which links to internal pages. Further down are still more animated .gifs, a number of ‘badges’ or emblems

(e.g. 'Made on a Mac'), and at the very bottom red, all caps text, that reads 'COPYRIGHT NOTICE', then a link to an external page hosted at Cornell University Law School with language about the fair use provision within US copyright law. There is no identification anywhere on the page (even scrolling all the way down) of the author or publisher, or the intended message of the site beyond speaking out for the 'new civil rights movement'. Indeed, determining authorship of this site is impossible without going to an external source.¹⁰

It would be a mistake to dismiss the harmful potential of the cloaked American Civil Rights Review site based on its crude graphic design. While it is true that the unappealing text and background colors, use of animated .gifs, screaming all caps headlines and default font settings, give this site away as a first-generation or 'last century' website (Flanders and Peters, 2001; Flanders and Willis, 1998), the racism and anti-semitism on the cloaked site are nuanced in some unexpected ways. On the interior page linked through the Currier & Ives painting, Weltner describes the 'High Self-Esteem' of 'Many Slaves' and goes on to make an argument for slavery as an 'idyllic' social system in which plantations were 'sanitary, happy, and humane' places rather than cruel, dehumanizing systems of brutal torture and forced labor. Weltner further erodes the historical reality of the racialized system of slavery by arguing that, 'Europeans' were equally mistreated by bad working conditions as enslaved Africans and African Americans were by chattel slavery. Weltner's argument defending slavery as a 'humane' system is not particularly new and harkens back to centuries' old versions of white supremacy; even the use of language echoes earlier forms of white supremacy such as that used by Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Feagin, 2006).

The nuance here exists in the combination of the use of digital media and the evidence that Weltner selects to make this argument. Weltner draws on the oral histories of former slaves recorded by Works Progress Administration workers in the 1930s and provides links to audiofiles and transcribed texts.¹¹ The Library of Congress has championed the collection and archiving of oral histories and oral histories have been used by educators to engage students about slavery, abolition and the civil rights struggle, as on another Library of Congress project website, Voices of Civil Rights (www.voicesofcivilrights.org), which features oral histories of the civil rights movement. However, in Weltner's hands, the oral histories take on a different meaning. On his cloaked site, he selectively compiles excerpts on a page titled 'Forgotten Black Voices', such as this quote from 'Adeline, 91': 'I wants to be in heaven with all my white folks, just to wait on them and love them, and serve them, sorta like I did in slavery time.' Here, a quote from oral history data which could be interpreted through a critical 'race' theory lens to illustrate the power of racist institutions to dominate the oppressed thoroughly, is interpreted

instead by Weltner through a white supremacist lens to support his revisionist claim that slavery was a ‘humane’ institution in which enslaved people were not mistreated. With this, Weltner takes what is a laudable (and legitimate) project by the Library of Congress, and repurposes the oral history source material for his own ends. Rather than valorizing the African American experience of surviving the horrors of slavery, as the project was conceived by the Library of Congress, the same material on Weltner’s cloaked site calls into question that very experience and the struggle to overcome it. By using language such as ‘Forgotten Black Voices’, Weltner draws on the language of multiculturalism and thus dodges any of the red flags of recognition that overt white supremacist rhetoric might raise. There is some evidence to suggest that the strategy of disguising cyber-racism in the rhetoric of multiculturalism is an effective one. In a qualitative study of adolescents’ reactions to cloaked sites, one young person aged 17, encountering this site, evaluated it rather positively, saying in reference to slavery, ‘I can understand their view. There’s two sides to everything’ (Daniels, 2008: 109).

There are a number of features characteristic of digital media that make Weltner’s strategy both potentially very effective and a failed attempt. Weltner’s appropriation of civil rights discourse on the internet is potentially much more effective than if it were published in a printed newsletter of the pre-internet era. While there were (and still are) vanity presses that publish books and newsletters without review, cost and limited distribution function as built-in constraints. In addition, recognizing some forms of racist propaganda in printed media is easier because they are distributed outside conventional channels. The fact that Weltner deploys language that imitates civil rights rhetoric and does so on a cloaked website that conceals his authorship and political agenda, means that without the gatekeeping of editors, publishers and broadcasters, Weltner’s rhetoric takes on the patina of legitimacy. Furthermore, Weltner’s appropriation of oral history material from a legitimate online source, the Library of Congress, blurs the line further between legitimate history and revisionist history. The link to the Library of Congress connects Weltner to a credible source, then his selective use and interpretation of the data from that source revises and subverts long-established historical facts. Finally, the internet has a kind of leveling effect that renders one source as valid as another, because they are both accessible via the same media: the same connection and browser window that delivers the Library of Congress or the *New York Times* also offers up Weltner’s cloaked site (Jacobson Harris, 2005; Metzger and Flanagan, 2007). This leveling effect makes other evidence, for example, visual cues such as graphic design and page layout, even more important for assessing the credibility of websites (Metzger et al., 2003). This is where Weltner’s site fails dramatically; his crude page design and layout render suspect all the text-based content at

the site. However, this particular kind of failure is an easy one to fix, either by a person with good graphic design skills, or by downloading a generic website template¹² and customizing it to include white supremacist political content. This means that Weltner is one good graphic designer away from a much more pernicious web presence.

Don Black, the white supremacist who maintains Stormfront, the largest and longest-running white supremacist website with the tagline 'White Pride World Wide', also publishes a number of cloaked sites, including 'Bamboo Delight' (www.bamboo-delight.com). The 'Bamboo Delight Company' website purports to offer visitors 'Acupuncture Lessons, Kung-Fu, Alternative Medicine, Weight Loss Secrets', and guidance in 'Chinese Wealth Secrets'. The headline on the top of the page tells visitors that by 'Combining Aryan Knowledge with Chinese Medicinal Exercises', an unidentified 'we' have been able to develop 'healing and Exercise methods superior to all others'. The word 'Aryan' is the only clue on this portion of the page that this is a white supremacist site; the author or publisher of the site is not disclosed. As with American Civil Rights Review, the author of Bamboo Delight is discernible only through an external source (Anti-Defamation League, 2001).

As with Weltner's cloaked site, the graphics and page layout are all 'last century' and suggest an amateurish skill at graphic design and webpage layout. The anti-semitism of the site's author is evident as one scrolls down the page. At the bottom of the page, the text situated between animated flashing multicolored horizontal bars suggests that 'diseases are never cured but only treated' because Jewish physicians are religiously prohibited from treating non-Jews. This cloaked site, which supposedly offers information about alternative medicine, conceals its political agenda by disguising its authorship, placing the overtly anti-semitic text at the bottom of a long page and distracting the user with the unexpected reference to 'Chinese medicine' not typically associated with white supremacy. This cloaked site blends the language of consumer psychology and attempts at catchy marketing phrases with the rhetoric of anti-semitism in many of the ways that Adorno (2002[1951]) observed.

Don Black also hosts 'Martin Luther King: A True Historical Examination', which is in many ways the archetypal cloaked site. Black registered the URL in 1998 and has maintained this site continuously since then. At first glance, the website appears to be a tribute to Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, albeit one intended for a younger audience, as indicated by the link at the top, 'Attention Students: Try our MLK Pop Quiz', and the one further down the page indicating 'Rap Lyrics'. However, there are a number of clues that something is amiss. The first is the description of the website as a 'A True Historical Examination'. The use of the word 'true' suggests an uncovering of some formerly untold truth about Dr King. Further, the inclusion of this

version of the truth is an additional clue about the author's intention. The main page features an unflattering quote from clandestine Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) audiotapes recorded while King was engaged in sexual activity with a woman other than his wife. The fact that this quote is taken from actual recordings and was published originally in *Newsweek* (this source is noted on the website), works in a similar fashion to Weltner's use of oral history material from the Library of Congress. While it is possible to read the transcript of King's conversations taped by the FBI within the larger context of systemic white supremacy in which nascent civil rights movements are stamped out routinely by the government (Feagin, 2006); within the context of this cloaked site, the quote is intended to undermine King's legitimacy as a civil rights leader, and with that, the goal of racial equality for which he stood.

Once on the website, there are a number of additional indications as to the source of the information, including a link in the right margin that reads 'Jews and Civil Rights', hinting at anti-semitism.¹³ Clicking on that link leads to a page which more than suggests anti-semitism, as it includes a chapter called 'Jews, Communism and Civil Rights' from white supremacist David Duke's book *My Awakening*. For the astute web user and student of racism in the USA, this is a giveaway of the website author's ideological orientation. Still, for many younger, less experienced web users, or those unfamiliar with recent US racial political history, the name 'David Duke' may have no resonance (Daniels, 2008). Going back to the first page, there is one more clue, should a casual web user want to know the origin of this 'True Historical Examination'. Scrolling down to the very bottom of the first page, there is a link that reads 'Hosted by Stormfront', and clicking on that link takes the user to Don Black's overt white supremacist site. Although these clues might seem fairly obvious to some relatively savvy web users (Jacobson Harris, 2007), others can and do miss them easily (Daniels, 2007, 2008). For example, in qualitative interviews with adolescents viewing this site, one young person (age 18) looking for civil rights information found the site through a search engine, and after visiting a site about King created by the *Seattle Times*, then another by Stanford University, within a matter of minutes she was at the cloaked site (Daniels, 2008). Thus, what makes this cloaked site archetypal is only partially about what is on the site itself; just as significant is the domain name and the place at which the site appears in search engine results.

Using a popular, standard search engine (e.g. Google, www.google.com; others such as Dogpile return similar results; www.dogpile.com) and the search terms 'Martin Luther King', this cloaked website regularly appears third or fourth in the results returned. The appearance of the cloaked website high in search engine results is significant, given that most users only examine the top 10 or 20 results (Bar-Ilan, 2006), and that many users implicitly trust Google's ranking as a source of legitimation (Pan et al., 2007). Before even

viewing the content of this site, the URL makes it appear to be legitimate, in part because the main web reference is made up of only the domain name 'martinlutherking', and the URL ends with the suffix '.org'. The decision to register the domain name 'martinlutherking.org' relatively early in the evolution of the web was a shrewd and opportune move for advocates of white supremacy, in part because it claimed the web presence of a civil rights leader, and because top-level domains ending in '.org' are widely perceived as credible. The failure to register 'martinlutherking' and all its variations as a domain name represents a lost opportunity for advocates of racial equality. Recognizing that domain name registration is now a political battleground, a number of civil rights organizations have begun to reserve domain names to prevent them from being used by opponents of racial justice. For example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People registered six domain names that include the word 'nigger', and the Anti-Defamation League registered a similar number of domain names with the word 'kike' (Festa, 1998). However, registering offensive epithets is only a small part of the struggle. The move by opponents to register the esteemed symbols of civil rights as domain names, such as Martin Luther King, and use them to undermine racial justice, is clearly one which was unanticipated by most civil rights organizations. To be effective, cloaked sites with domain names such as www.martinlutherking.org or www.americancivilrightsreview.org, rely on the naïveté of their target audience, a predominantly white audience that moves further away each year from the experience of the civil rights era.

The presence of cloaked sites raises important questions about racist propaganda in the digital era: one of these has to do with whether someone could 'stumble upon' virulent anti-semitism or racism online. It is not only possible but likely that casual or novice web users could come across racist propaganda inadvertently while looking for legitimate civil rights information. The cloaked Martin Luther King site is a case in point. Using the web monitoring service Alexa (www.Alexa.com), traffic was charted for 2005–6 to this cloaked site and to the legitimate civil rights website for The King Center (www.thekingcenter.org), published by the King family organization in Atlanta; in addition, these were charted comparatively. The estimated traffic for both sites is in the tens of millions in terms of number of hits, and the traffic patterns for the two sites are strikingly similar. Unsurprisingly, traffic to both sites peaks annually around the time of Martin Luther King Day (toward the end of January) and during Black History Month (February). There is also one noticeable difference in traffic between the two sites. The traffic to the King Center site increased significantly on 31 January 2005, the day that Mrs King died. Other than this one, rather dramatic difference, the traffic patterns for the two sites are remarkably comparable. The patterns

are so similar in fact, that it suggests that web users who are looking for legitimate civil rights information may well be ending up at the cloaked white supremacist site (Daniels, 2007, 2008).

The online home of the Institute for Historical Review is a cloaked site that may be more nefarious for its skillful graphic user interface. On this site, the graphic user interface is much more polished than on any of the previous sites discussed. There are no audiofiles or animated .gifs, as with Weltner's site, and none of the amateurish background colors or fonts as with Black's sites. There are books and tapes available for sale on the left and right sides of the page, and down the center is a list of brief, paragraph-long descriptions of various news stories, each accompanied by a hyperlink and a photo. Across the top of the main page is a row of links to other pages on the site. The rhetoric on the site appears quite moderate at first glance, and the mission is described as 'dedicated' to 'truth and free speech'. The structure, graphic design and language on this page look completely benign; but of course, they are not. As critically aware readers will know, the Institute for Historical Review is an organization that seeks to deny the existence of the Holocaust and is published by Mark Weber, based in Orange County, CA. The Institute touts itself as a source of scholarly information to which 'countless scholars, researchers and journalists have turned' for 'solid and reliable information' (<http://www.ihr.org/main/about.shtml>). The web users who know who Mark Weber is, or who are already aware of the mission and deceptive nature of the Institute, will not be misled by the cloaked website. However, for the uninitiated, it is very likely that the combination of professional-looking graphic design and non-extremist sounding rhetoric can be disarming and effectively deceptive.¹⁴ The Holocaust revisionists of the Institute adhere to a philosophy that their pursuit of 'solid and reliable information' is stigmatized knowledge, similar to the revisionist history of slavery according to Weltner and the 'untold truth' about Dr King according to Don Black (Barkun, 2003). When this commitment to 'uncovering' stigmatized knowledge coincides with anti-semitism, as it so often does, pre-cyberfrauds such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* find a renewed life in the digital era (Weitzman and Jacobs, 2003). Thus, while Holocaust revisionism, conspiracy theories, anti-semitism and racism certainly existed in the print era, the internet offers a new terrain for those who seek and produce this type of stigmatized 'knowledge'. The internet also complicates and blurs the lines between history and propaganda.

Epistemology in the digital era

As previously mentioned, cloaked websites present a particular kind of epistemological challenge in the digital era: they use a number of different strategies to disguise a variety of agendas. The key strategy is difficult to

detect or deceptive authorship. Sometimes, as with the Teen Breaks site, there is simply no information about the author and it is necessary to do additional research and consult other sources to determine authorship. Other cloaked sites, such as *Martin Luther King: A True Historical Examination*, say at the very bottom of the page who hosts the site, but without the skill to scroll all the way to the bottom of the page and a critical awareness of racial politics, this authorship is effectively hidden from view. Other sites such as the Institute for Historical Review clearly reveal the author, but without an awareness of who Mark Weber is and a recognition of the anti-semitism implicit in his agenda of Holocaust denial, this site is effectively cloaked by assertions that it is a valid source of 'solid and reliable information'. Cloaked sites use links to legitimate sources of information, such as Yahoo! and the Library of Congress, to further obfuscate their agendas. Moreover, cloaked sites boldly lay claim to 'truth' by simply stating that they offer special access to it, as in the *Martin Luther King* cloaked site, which suggests that it is presenting otherwise unknown 'facts' about Dr King. All of these strategies of cloaked sites present epistemological challenges.

The fact that cyber-racists have laid claim to 'truth' via the internet challenges the basis for any assertion about racial equality, because it calls into question what constitutes the 'truth' that we say we know about 'race', racism and racial inequality. Cyber-racism, which encompasses uniquely web-based mechanisms of undermining civil rights and values of racial equality alongside overtly racist and anti-semitic speech, calls into question how we make and evaluate knowledge claims, as well as our vision for social justice in this new digital terrain.

Search engines also play a key role in this new epistemology. Without the gatekeeping of editors, publishers and broadcasters to grant legitimacy, search engines become a primary mechanism for sorting and accumulating knowledge (Metzger and Flanagin, 2007). All information is not equally available online. Search engine results, the layout of portal sites and hyperlinks through which people are directed from one site to another all influence the type of information that people encounter online (Hargittai, 2004). A recent experiment involving college students found that these users place substantial trust in Google's ability to rank results by their true relevance to the query. When study participants selected a link to follow from Google's result pages, their decisions were biased strongly towards the links higher in position, even if the abstracts themselves were less relevant (Pan et al., 2007). This trust in Google's rank in the study by Pan and colleagues has direct implications for the effectiveness of cloaked white supremacist sites. Given that such sites regularly appear near the top of the first page of search engine queries related to civil rights, web users can and do misinterpret the Google rank to be a marker of credibility, a misreading that is enhanced further by

cleverly disguised URLs (Daniels, 2008). The strategies of cloaked websites mean that the terrain of struggle over racial equality in the digital era has shifted to the arena of domain name and search engines. This shift introduces new epistemological challenges to our understanding of racial equality.

The emergence of cyber-racism is an attempt to undermine the value of racial equality through the mechanism of cloaked websites. The fact that there are generations of young people who are much more likely to use a search engine than a library to find information about civil rights at the same time as there are cyber-racists staking a claim on undermining the value of racial equality, means that hard-won political truths about racial equality and civil rights are up for grabs. Within this milieu, neither a postmodern epistemology in which all truths are partial, nor an epistemology in which there is only a single, objective truth, will suffice. Thus, an alternative epistemology in which values are part of the process of evaluating knowledge claims becomes a crucial element to meet the challenge of cloaked websites.

The social and political context of cloaked websites

The emergence of cloaked websites illustrates the way that advertising and propaganda have converged in new and interesting ways in the digital era. While those on the Left use cloaked sites to skewer the powerful (e.g. The Yes Men), huge multinational corporations hire public relations firms to design cloaked sites intended to undermine attempts at labor organizing (e.g. Wal-Mart). Cloaked sites are not a strategy used exclusively by those on the Left or Right, but are deployed to further a range of political goals. However, when these strategies of difficult to detect lies and the introduction of baseless 'facts' to further a particular agenda are joined with substantial political and economic power, this convergence of advertising and propaganda can wreak havoc on democratic ideals.

One of the key features of the mainstream right-wing's political success in the USA has been to challenge 'fact-based reality'. This reinforcing system of knowledge includes conservative think-tanks, pundits and writers who are engaged in a pointed ideological battle which has provided a base of lies, and propaganda has enabled an even larger web of half-truths in support of an immoral war abroad and a domestic disaster (Rich, 2006). This knowledge production network of counter intellectuals produces a steady flow of manufactured 'facts' which suit a conservative faith-based agenda including pseudo-science such as 'intelligent design', 'reparative therapy to cure homosexuality' and 'abstinence-only' sex education. It is an ironic twist then, that conservatives have created their own version of postmodern, radical deconstructionism where 'truth' is no longer possible under the guise of cultural tolerance for diverse views (Goldberg, 2006). Those in this conservative knowledge-production network see opportunity in the digital

media. For example, the site 'Conservapedia' (www.conservapedia.com) created by Andrew Schlafly (Phyllis Schlafly's son), is intended to counter the supposedly 'liberal bias' of the popular Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), the 'free encyclopedia anyone can edit' (Cleveland Leader, 2007; Decker, 2007). Those on the Right are waging a political and cultural battle by subverting knowledge claims, and the internet is a valuable asset in such an effort. Cyber-racists have recognized this potential of the internet for their struggle.

The cyber-racism of cloaked white supremacist sites emerges within a broader context of a post-civil rights era that is also supposedly 'post-racial' and post-racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Collins, 2004; Everett, 2004). Tony Snow, former Bush White House press secretary, is emblematic of the hegemonic view that we are living in a 'post-racism' era. In 2003, he said: 'Here's the unmentionable secret: Racism isn't that big a deal any more. No sensible person supports it. Nobody of importance preaches it. It's rapidly becoming an ugly memory' (The Raw Story, 2006). Snow exemplifies a particular kind of racial illiteracy characteristic of those who view the world through a white racial frame which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to perceive racism and 'race'-based inequality (Daniels, 2009; Feagin, 2006; Mills, 1997). The internet in particular has been demarcated erroneously within popular culture as a place where there is no 'race' (Everett, 2007; Nakamura, 2002). Within such a context, cloaked white supremacist sites are even more difficult to discern because they are unexpected, even unfathomable, and thus unrecognizable.

The cloaked websites examined here are a small piece of a broader social landscape in which propaganda, advertising, politics and cyber-racism are converging in new ways that make it increasingly difficult to parse facts from political spoofs and marketing ploys, and to distinguish legitimate civil rights websites from cloaked white supremacist sites. In the contemporary milieu, 'truth' has been replaced by 'truthiness' (as late-night talk show host Steven Colbert's satirizes this strategy). As old and new media forms converge (Jenkins, 2006a), the unique epistemological challenges presented by digital media further complicate the tasks required of web users. Within this setting, authorship and deep research on sources is imperative, and is tied to an epistemology that envisions knowledge as a product of the individuals who create and share it.

CONCLUSION

Cloaked websites can disguise a variety of political agendas – from left-wing to right-wing individuals, from multinational corporate interests to anti-globalization activists, from pro-life advocates to cyber-racists. As outlined in this article, part of what makes cloaked sites potentially such effective

mechanisms for propaganda is that they are often difficult to distinguish from other forms of information found online because they frequently draw on legitimate sources of information to support their claims. The presence of cloaked sites raises important issues about epistemology. With regard to the specific case of cyber-racism, these sites challenge the foundations of what we say we know about racism and racial equality. Adorno warned about the dangers of ‘test-marketed’ racist propaganda of a previous era, and many of his insights hold true for the digital era. Cloaked websites such as Weltner’s Katrina Families and the Bush administration’s use of mass media outlets such as Fox News, illustrate the use a type of test-marketed, public relations-style rhetoric intended to appeal to the broadest possible audience. The goal of this sort of propaganda is to subvert putatively shared beliefs about previously agreed upon facts. In the case of cyber-racism, cloaked sites are intended to undermine the value of racial equality; in the case of Fox News, the goal has been to offer ideological justification for a series of ill-fated political goals. In both cases, the ‘truth’ of agreed-upon facts is called into question. Critical theorists associated with the Frankfurt School such as Adorno stressed the importance of critical thinking by arguing that it is a constitutive feature of the struggle for self-emancipation and social change (Giroux, 2001). While there is certainly room for a critique of the ways that rationality contributes to systems of domination (Goldberg, 1993), the hidden political agendas of cloaked websites suggest the need for a renewal in the cultivation of rationality and critical thinking.

Discerning between a cloaked site and a legitimate site is a complicated task. It requires digital literacy skills, including web credibility, and critical thinking skills, including situating the author of the information on the site within a social and political context and the user in relation to the site, the author and the context. A good deal of the task of parsing cloaked from legitimate sites involves making decisions that require an understanding of the political and social context in which websites emerge. For example, a critical awareness of white supremacist rhetorical strategies, such as efforts at Holocaust denial as part of a larger anti-semitic effort, is a crucial first step in recognizing some cloaked sites. Yet, 10 or more years into the digital media revolution, our initial ways of thinking about digital media literacy are woefully inadequate to this task at best, and misleading at worst. The widely used strategy of instructing users to ‘look at the URL’ and especially the three-letter suffix (.com, .edu, .org) is advice that serves only to make many cloaked sites appear more legitimate, rather than less so.

What is needed in order to accurately evaluate and effectively challenge cyber-racism is an alternative epistemology which calls on lived experience, ethics and reason as interconnected, essential components in assessing knowledge claims (Collins, 2000). In this alternative epistemology, values

lie at the heart of the knowledge validation process and ideas cannot be divorced from the individuals who create and share them (Collins, 2000). Castells (1997) argues that social movements in the information age attempt to influence cultural values, and indeed, cyber-racists are trying to undermine the value of racial equality through the use of cloaked sites. For those who share the cultural value of racial equality, it is imperative to have an apparatus for evaluating knowledge claims while simultaneously keeping the ethical aim of racial equality in focus. The foregoing analysis suggests that along with digital literacy skills, we need to develop literacies of racism, anti-racism and social justice.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Glen Blankenship for making me aware of these types of propaganda.
- 2 The site is no longer on the web, but the creators have a webpage that chronicles the saga and offers screenshots of some earlier versions of the site, along with audio of Bush's 'freedom ought to have limits' reaction. Available online at: <http://www.rtmk.com/bush.html>; last accessed 24 July 2007.
- 3 'The Yes Men' chronicle their unique version of activism in the documentary film, *The Yes Men* (2003). I am grateful to Ryan Button for pointing out the use of cloaked sites by The Yes Men (see The Yes Men, nd).
- 4 'Astroturf', used to describe 'fake grass roots' campaigns, is a term that pre-dates the internet and was coined by the late senator Lloyd Bentsen (D-Texas). Today, it is used most often to refer to online efforts to propagate word-of-mouth interest in a product.
- 5 Formerly at www.youthforvolpe.ca, until Volpe took action to have the original site removed.
- 6 The original weblink to this reference to Mark Weber in the *Globe and Mail* on 6 January 2006, 'Volpe to Return Some Contributions', is now defunct. A reference to this article is given in the following link: http://www.zoominfo.com/people/Volpe_Joe_719055477.aspx.
- 7 The Yes Men have a different take on public identity; they use cloaked sites to enact culture-jamming 'identity correction', in which: 'Honest people impersonate big-time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them. Targets are leaders and big corporations who put profits ahead of everything else' (see www.theyesmen.org).
- 8 According to several online sources, Sandra Choate Faucher is president of the Rosetta Foundation. However, so little information is available about her or the Foundation online that it is possible that she is a 'sock puppet' – that is, a fictional character created by someone else.
- 9 Marc Levin interviews Weltner in the documentary film, *Protocols of Zion* (2005). The Anti-Defamation League describes Weltner's site thus:

Jew Watch organizes its anti-Semitic materials much in the same way a popular Web directory might group more benign information. Weltner presents accusations that Jews were behind the terrors caused by Russia's Communist regime in 'Jews, Communism, and The Job of Killing Off the USSR's Christians'. 'Jewish Genocides Today and Yesterday' describes an alleged Jewish plan to deport non-Jews from the U.S. in 1946. '90% of All United States Newspapers Are Owned and Run by Jews' repeats the oft-heard charge that

Jews run the media, and 'The Rothschild Internationalist-Zionist-Banking-One World Order Family' claims that Jews control the world of finance. Adolf Hitler's writings, transcripts of Father Charles Coughlin's anti-Semitic radio broadcasts, and the text of Henry Ford Sr.'s bigoted International Jew are all available at Jew Watch as well. (Anti-Defamation League, 2001)

While Weltner created and for many years maintained Jew Watch and American Civil Rights Review, he sold his websites to James Stenzel on 18 March 2008 (personal communication with Stenzel). The sites have not changed since Stenzel took over ownership, so I refer to Weltner throughout this analysis.

- 10 External sources to check domain registration include the 'Who Is' look-up registry, but it is possible for registrants to anonymize their ownership. One can use web traffic services such as Alexa to vet sites and check authorship, or use a link analyzer to see what other sites link to the site. All of these have limitations, thus making discerning authorship when the author intends to conceal it that much more difficult.
- 11 *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938* contains more than 2300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves. These narratives were collected in the 1930s as part of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration, and assembled and microfilmed in 1941 as the 17-volume *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*. It is available as an online collection, sponsored jointly by the Manuscripts Division and the Prints and Photographs Divisions of the Library of Congress, with funding provided by the Citigroup Foundation: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>.
- 12 There are dozens, if not hundreds, of services online that offer professionally-designed website templates that anyone can download for a nominal fee (around \$50) and customize with their own content. See for example, Template Monster (<http://www.monstertemplate.com>).
- 13 Here, context is the key. The word 'Jew' is not in itself anti-semitic of course; but when that term is used rather than 'Jewish people' or 'Jewish tradition', it raises suspicions.
- 14 Indeed, a colleague told me of his son's Hebrew schoolteacher, who was a rabbinic student, and gave three web resources for a research project on the Holocaust. The web resource the teacher highlighted as 'the best' of the three was the Institute for Historical Review. Personal communication with Kenneth S. Stern, 9 August 2007.

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JESSIE DANIELS is Associate Professor of Urban Public Health at Hunter College, City University of New York. She is the author of two books, *White Lies* (Routledge, 1997) and *Cyber Racism* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), both dealing with 'race' and various forms of media. Currently she is working on a number of research projects about digital media, 'race' and gender, including an ethnography of the use of mobile technologies by homeless lesbian/gay/transgender/queer youth, and in-depth interviews with feminist bloggers.
Address: Hunter College, City University of New York, 10th Floor, West Building, 425 E. 25th Street, New York, NY 10010, USA. [email: jdaniels@hunter.cuny.edu]
