Beyond Hashtags

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Published by NYU Press


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Conclusion

Race, Culture, and Digital Studies

This book only scratches the surface of the rich and robust digital assemblage that is its focus. After mapping the transplatform nature of this oscillating networked public, my primary focus was how it was used by racialized subjects as a resource for navigating a white supremacist society, whether that be for memory work that challenges the historic foundations upon which colorblindness rests or to interpret, respond to, and actively agitate against racial violence by the state. The flexible and malleable character of the network makes it a resource for a broad range of practices. However, since the time that I completed my research in mid-2016, several of the fundamental aspects of this network and the context in which it operates have shifted.

The concept of digital publics is well-worn among the disciplines that study digital technologies. However, if we are to take seriously the assertion that digitally networked publics are both a group of people and a technological space in which that group is constituted, then we must devote more sustained attention to the transplatform technological space in which the collection of people operate. While it often makes sense to limit studies by platform, sustained attention to the interlocking uses of multiple platforms yields additional insights, particularly into the complicated ways that distributed discourse production occurs across platforms and employs a range of media. This approach is particularly urgent given the increasing platformization of the web.¹

Cultural Specificity and Critical Digital Studies

Throughout, I have heavily emphasized cultural specificity, grounding my analysis in histories of Black communication, media production, and thought and attending to the particularities of the experiences of
Black subjectivities. Given that affordances are imagined through the interaction of the designers’ intent, the materiality and functionality of the technology, and the perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of the user, then changing one of these components can yield radically different outcomes. Don Norman argues that affordances must be perceived by the user to exist and be utilized. Users from marginalized cultural backgrounds and subject positions are likely to perceive affordances in ways that differ from their normative hegemonic applications and to see different ways to use technology.

But the utility of a culturally specific approach goes far beyond highlighting the differences in use patterns between groups. If the sum total of the insight offered was, “White people tweet like this. Black people tweet like that,” that would be relatively narrow contribution. What is most valuable about this approach is how these differences can help us imagine different possibilities for technologies beyond hegemonic frameworks and thereby allow us to better anticipate and grapple with the social shifts that shape and are shaped by technology.

Marginalized users are often required to be innovators, as Twitter clearly shows. From its inception, white tech professionals on the platform suggested that Black users were using Twitter differently or even “wrong.” Black Twitter, as it came be known, was more homophilic and conversational than normative conceptualization of Twitter held by white, mostly male, early adopters from the tech field. This difference was so pronounced that even as late as 2013, when Twitter added the conversations feature that linked a reply to the tweet it was responding to, discussions of the new feature revealed a difference in the Black imagined affordances and the normative imagined affordances of Twitter. White-presenting technology reporter Will Oremus wrote that while he had expected the new feature to be annoying, he found the change to be almost unnoticeable, “because hardly anyone holds actual conversations on Twitter.” He described his timeline as full of “techies, academics, journalists, politicians, and comedians,” who were all “too busy barking into their own megaphones to respond to anyone else” or “lurking passively in the faceless crowd, piping up only via the occasional timid retweet or favorite.” He also noted that the earlier versions of Twitter discouraged replies: “Under the old system, the fact that only the latest reply showed up in your timeline made conversations appear exclusive even when you
were following both parties. It felt like you were constantly showing up late to an A/B conversation, and the polite thing to do was to C yourself out.” Yet, Black Twitter connected and flourished under these conditions. Black users often saw such A/B conversations as an invitation to collective communication. For this network, hashtags served not only as organizational tools aggregating topics, but as a “call” to participation in the Black American traditions of signifyin’ and call-and-response. Though those in tech might have seen these as nonnormative, even uncommon, uses, these use patterns became prominent enough on Twitter to prompt the platform to add a feature to facilitate it.

Because people from marginalized populations are often forced to make do with technologies that were not designed with them in mind, they have become adept at imagining affordances that subvert the social and cultural norms technologies would otherwise enforce. The Chilin’ Circuit podcasts clearly demonstrate how changing the users in the triad of users, designers, and materiality and functionality produces affordances can result in starkly different approaches. Through an imbrication of the broadcast-style network and the social network, these podcasts, podcasters have produced a collective space that manages to serve as a digital iteration of traditions of both mass media production and sociality. The podcasts and their listeners, through their collaborative communitarian approach, make these podcasts into nodes in the larger distributed conversation of the network. They serve not only as a means of distributing information and circulating discourse, but also as enclaves that insulate participants from those seeking to disrupt and harass them. Their highly interactive sonic simulations of Black social enclaves are then heard through headphones by listeners who consume the podcasts while in predominantly white spaces. Thus headphones, which are normatively conceived of as technologies of neoliberal individuation, can instead be used to reinforce a sense of connection and collectivity.

This argument about the broad value of culturally specificity comes with two important caveats. First, it is certainly not only Black users who offer valuable insights into the possibilities of technologies. Not only do various marginalized groups have distinct subject positions and epistemologies that generate different perspectives on technology—the ability to perceive a different set of affordances, but they have also long been
forced to be creative and savvy in using technologies to suit needs and desires not envisioned by the designers. For example, Lori Kido Lopez has demonstrated how Hmong living in the United States have developed what she calls “teleconference radio,” the use of conference-call software and mobile phones to create radio-style programming. Here a marginalized group of users, bringing their own perspectives and expectations, transform technologies designed for one-on-one and small group communication into a broadcast-style medium. They use the mobile phone—a technology that both emerges from and reinforces individualist neoliberal impulses—to cultivate collectivity.

My second caveat is that learning from the practices of marginalized people must be done with humility and a deep commitment to ethics. We cannot treat marginalized users as objects of study from whom we extract knowledge, as has too often been the case. We must conceive of them as interlocutors in the production of knowledge, a sentiment often heard in the academy but less frequently put into practice. How one does this will vary by context and can include greater engagement with the work of marginalized scholars about their communities, taking the time to establish trust and build relationships to work collaboratively, allowing the people you are writing about to have continued and real input into shaping the final results (including allowing them to set the boundaries for what knowledge will be made accessible and what should remain off limits), or making space and providing financial support for the participation of nonacademic experts in academic settings. Fortunately, we have generations of ethnographers who have grappled with these challenges and whose work can guide us in finding the line between taking marginalized users’ knowledge seriously and just simply taking it.

I do not think it is far-fetched to say that centering marginalized users and what they have to tell us about technology will benefit not only researchers of digital technologies, but also society as a whole. Many white Americans were caught off guard by the hard-right shift and the reemergence of overt white supremacy that accompanied the ascendency of Donald Trump. But there is a direct line from trolls harassing Black feminists on Twitter in 2012 to the emergence of the “Alt-Right.” Had we heeded the warnings, rather than writing such incidents off as trivial internet conflicts, we would have seen the ways that digital networks were
empowering racism and misogyny as much as marginalized voices. We would have seen the radicalization of young men by the Men’s Rights Movement and the emergence of the “incel” (involuntarily celibate) subculture thriving on 4Chan, 8Chan, and Reddit. We would have taken seriously their rhetoric and beliefs, which have led to more than one mass shooting—in 2014 in Isla Vista near University of California at Santa Barbara and in 2015 at Umpqua Community College in Oregon.8

Racial Regimes in Flux

In the time between concluding my research for this book and its publication, the shift in the US landscape has radically altered US racial discourses and how the network discussed here functions as an oscillating networked public. First, the status of colorblindness as the dominant US racial ideology is now unclear. Key to colorblindness is the conflation of equality with the erasure of difference. By definition, it mandates that race is not to be perceived and requires racism be obscured in coded language and seemingly nonracial policies and discourses. In this way, it preserves, while denying, racial hierarchies. But, increasingly, with Trump’s ascendancy, there seems to be no need to camouflage or disguise racist language or policies. In fact, it is often the opposite, with willingness to express overt racism often praised as “telling it like it is.” Colorblindness’s prohibition on acknowledging race, while remaining intact for those advocating against white supremacy, has all but vanished for those advocating for oppressive and discriminatory policies.

Trump embodies this shift, tapping into white fear and racism (along with xenophobia, sexism, and anti-LGBTQ sentiment). He has consistently employed inflammatory rhetoric that has both unmasked and intensified white supremacist values—conflating immigrants and asylum seekers from Central and South America with violent criminal gang MS-13; referring to Haiti and African nations as “shithole” countries; calling for a “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,” to name but a few instances.9 Trump’s cabinet appointments and policies have followed a similar trajectory. His Attorney General Jeff Sessions failed to be confirmed as a Federal Judge in 1987 because of questions about his attitudes toward race. Several of his top advisers—
Steve Bannon, Sebastian Gorka, and Steven Miller—have ties to white supremacist organizations and espouse white nationalist ideologies.\textsuperscript{10} Rhetoric and behavior that would have been solidly out of bounds within traditional norms of colorblindness have themselves become normalized. Several studies have shown that Trump supporters were consistently motivated by racial hostility, rather than economic anxiety, as many editorials and think pieces have proclaimed.\textsuperscript{11} Membership in hate groups has been steadily climbing, with neo-Nazi groups seeing the greatest surge, and hate crimes steadily rose between 2016 and 2018.\textsuperscript{12} There has also been a surge in the construction of Confederate monuments on private land, and the 2018 mid-term elections featured eight openly white nationalist candidates running for national office, including a Holocaust denier who argued Black people have IQs on average 20 points below those of whites.\textsuperscript{13} In one of the largest displays of overt white supremacy in recent memory, in August 2017, Charlottesville, Virginia was swarmed by hundreds of white supremacists, rebranded as the “Alt-Right,” who carried tiki torches and chanted “Jews will not replace us” and the Nazi slogan “Blood and soil.” The rally became chaotic and violent as skirmishes broke out between white supremacists and counter-protestors, escalating into the severe the beating of DeAndre Harris and culminating in a white supremacist driving a car into a crowd and killing Heather Heyer.\textsuperscript{14} Trump famously said of the tragedy that there were “very fine people on both sides.”\textsuperscript{15}

With public displays of blatant white supremacy on the rise, it is possible that we are witnessing the waning of colorblindness and the emergence of a new racial paradigm. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has cautioned against this assumption, highlighting the parallels between the contemporary moment and the resurgence of more overt racism that occurred during the Reagan administration. The 1980s saw economic hardship—increased foreclosures, personal bankruptcies, and failed small businesses—as well anti-Black rhetoric from the president and an increase in both law enforcement and civilian violence toward people of color. He notes that even with the increase in overt racism, Trump and his supporters still must “genuflect to the color-blind norms of the period.” Colorblindness still requires Trump to maintain he is not racist, and he does indeed make frequent claims that he is “the least racist person,” as well as courting voters of color, despite ultimately ignor-
ing them on policy issues. Similarly, the stars of the seemingly never-ending stream of viral videos showing white Americans on tirades against people of color inevitably, when identified, also feel compelled to deny that they are in any way racist. Even white supremacists have rebranded themselves as “white nationalists,” “Western chauvinists,” “identitarians,” and the “Alt-Right,” advocating the inferiority of people of color and the need for a white ethno-state in one breath while denying they are racists with the other.

Thus, while colorblindness may not be dying, it certainly seems as if we are seeing a new iteration that differs from that of the last twenty-five years. Initially, colorblindness entailed a semantic move that disarticulated the signifier “racism” from any structural or systemic processes of oppression and rearticulated it to a set of individual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. The price for this obscuring of structural white supremacy was acquiescence to some modicum of racial progress. Overt displays of racism, such as hate groups, the use of racial slurs, or open discrimination were stigmatized because their normalization would render it impossible to claim race was irrelevant as a social category. It’s difficult to claim that United States triumphed over racism if open white supremacy is accepted as part of the normal range of political positions. Or, at least, it used to be.

In the contemporary moment, “racism” seems to have become a floating signifier, articulated to nothing beyond a generally agreed-upon stigma. We all agree racism is bad, with some going so far as to claim “racist” is the worst thing a person can be called. But we increasingly seem unable to identify anything as being racism. Previously, only the most overt displays of racism would be labeled as such—for example a fully hooded Klansman burning a cross and yelling racial slurs. Now it seems as if that Klansman could just pull off his hood and proclaim, with little cognitive dissonance and broad acceptance, that he “doesn’t have a racist bone in his body” and that he is offended at the accusation. It is this incarnation of colorblindness, one untethered to fact or reality, that allows Richard Spencer—a man who advocates for the forcible sterilization of people of color and the construction of an imperial white ethno-state—to tweet, “What’s wrong with loving being white? I am not a supremacist, by the way. I just love my people.” The shift in colorblind discourse may just be one of degree, not necessarily in kind. But it
certainly seems as if we are witnessing a new incarnation of colorblindness, one to fit our “post-truth” moment. This new sociocultural terrain will require new strategies—discursive and technological—to move forward in the fight against white supremacy.

Listen to Black Women (but for Real This Time)

Much of this book focuses on Twitter as serving a counter-public function, allowing participants to engage other publics, to push counter-discourses into the broader public conversation, and to make interventions in corporate media through dialogic engagement. This strategy seemed to reach peak efficacy between 2013 and 2015. During that time the strength of Twitter as a platform for Black counter-discourses elicited similarly strong attempts to undermine its efficacy as a counter-public. Harassment, abuse, and even Russian bots have increasingly made Twitter less effective for political engagement and much more unpleasant to use. As Imani Gandy explained of the harassment on the platform, “Often, the best solution is to reduce Twitter activity or to quit the platform entirely. I know many women who have already done that.”

Since Twitter’s trending topics make Black Twitter visible to those outside the network, there have been efforts to harass and abuse Black users, particularly Black users who are also women and/or LGBTQ. I choose here to avoid the word commonly used to describe this behavior—namely, “troll.” As Kishonna Gray and Whitney Phillips have both argued, the term works to minimize harassment and its impact. This minimization has helped these behaviors to flourish and to deeply impact not just internet culture, but US culture and politics writ large.

Harassment always occurred on Twitter. But it intensified and coalesced as a coordinated political effort in 2014 and continued to do so through the 2016 presidential election. Harassment was clearly evident during the 2012 advocacy for justice for Trayvon Martin, and it was such behavior that drove participants from social media to the audio enclave provided by TWiB! on the night of the verdict. Both Gandy and Terrell Starr wrote pieces in 2014 detailing years of harassment and abuse that women, particularly Black women, endured online and Twitter’s steadfast unwillingness to curb the hostility. Gandy was stalked on-
line, across platforms and under multiple user names, by one user who went primarily by the online pseudonym “Assholster.” She describes her tormentor as “an anonymous Twitter asshole who, on most days, creates up to ten different Twitter accounts just so he can hurl racist slurs at me: I’m a ‘nigger,’ I look ‘niggery,’ I haven’t earned my ‘nigger card,’ I’m a ‘pseudonigger,’ ‘fucking niggster,’ or ‘scab nigger.’” He also often tagged others in the network I write about here—Feminista Jones, Elon James White, L. Joy Williams, and Jamie Nesbitt Golden, co-host of the Nerdgasm Noire Network podcast, writer, and feminist commentator. Gandy endured his abuse for three years, cataloging and reporting his interactions with her to no avail, before identifying and doxing (releasing personal identifying information) him herself in 2015.23 Her story is not an outlier.

Moreover, attacks became more coordinated and sustained, starting in 2013, when users from message boards such as 4Chan and Reddit began creating fake accounts in attempts to impersonate, infiltrate, and sow discord among what they termed “SJWs,” social justice warriors. The fake accounts had two additional goals: to create in-group fighting among feminists online, specifically targeting women of color feminists, and to paint feminist politics as extreme and ridiculous. They began in 2013, roughly around the time that Mikki Kendall’s hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, which was used to critique the shortcomings of white feminists on issues of race, was receiving widespread attention and bringing longstanding tensions to the fore.

The harassers set up accounts using stock photos of women of color and gave them names such as NayNay Thompson, Aisha Salaam, and Phoebe Kwon. The users spearheading this campaign had at least some loose associations with the Pick-Up-Artist (PUA) movement, an industry dedicated to teaching men how to “attract” women. PUA philosophy is deeply misogynistic and focuses on achieving heterosexual sexual conquest through psychological, and sometimes physical, manipulation. One high-profile PUA, Roosh Valizadeh, has suggested First World men move to impoverished nations to find a woman to manipulate into submission, argued that rape should be legal on private property, and featured pieces such as “5 Reasons to Date a Girl with an Eating Disorder” and “The Intellectual Inferiority of Women” on his now-defunct website, Return of the Kings.24 It was Return of the Kings that posted
the first known synopsis of the coordinated effort to use sock puppet accounts—fake accounts created to deliberately deceive—to target SJWs, which the post claimed was codenamed “Operation Lollipop.” The post even included screen captures of fake accounts, including that of “Phoebe Kwon,” that would be instrumental in promoting the fake hashtag #End Fathers Day.25

It was in 2014 that a collection of these sock puppet feminists attempted to trend two fake hashtags—#End Fathers Day and #Whites Cant Be Raped. The former included statements such as “men shouldn’t be allowed around children” and claimed that Father’s Day “celebrates patriarchy and oppression” and should be replaced with “Castration Day.”26 The latter included claims such as “#Rape = #Force + #Privilege. #Whites Cant Be Raped by PoC [person of color], period. #YesAllWoman who are white and don’t accept this are racist.”27 In response, @sassy-crass and @so_treu, who are highly visible Black feminists on Twitter, created a hashtag #Your Slip Is Showing that was used to crowdsource a list of accounts that were part of the sock puppet operation and led to the unmasking hundreds of accounts.28

These harassment campaigns occurred in tandem with “Gamergate,” a coordinated effort to harass women and people of color associated with the video game industry. Gamergate was yet another iteration of the anti-SJW sentiment that had been percolating online for years. It originated and was coordinated on the same message boards as previous harassment campaigns and featured many of the same players. Gamergate participants claimed they were advocating for “ethics in video game journalism.” However, their most consistent complaint seemed to be that feminist and antiracist SJWs were ruining the game industry, and thereby their beloved games, with “political correctness.” Game developers such as Zoë Quinn and Briana Wu became targets. The ongoing harassment campaign against feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian, who had been targeted since her 2012 fundraiser to start a YouTube video series critiquing representations of women in gaming, was added to the efforts.29 These women received death and rape threats and were doxed and harassed across platforms. Sarkeesian had to move out of her home, and even now these women must routinely have bomb sweeps and extra security measures at their speaking engagements. While Gamergate focused the worst of its ire on high-profile women, its perpetrators also
targeted and harassed people of color, particularly women of color, on social media. Users ranging from micro-celebrities to unknown users with small followings found themselves swarmed online for various SJW offenses. Even academics were caught in the wake of Gamergate’s wrath. Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw found themselves at the center of Gamergate conspiracy theory after their participation at a Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference, where they allegedly ran a fishbowl that was actually psyops (psychological operation) for the larger SJW conspiracy.30

These harassment campaigns were occurring concurrently with the unrest in Ferguson in 2014, and while they were not highly visible in the Black digital networks engaged with Ferguson during the 2014 protests, on the one-year anniversary of Mike Brown’s death, hashtags like #Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter were flooded with what seemed like auto-generated spam tweets, making the hashtag difficult to use as a locus of remembrance or organizing. Notably, the hashtag #FergusonTaughtMe, created by Leslie Mac of the Ferguson Response Network and Interracial Jawn podcasts remained relatively spam-free despite appearing in the US trending topics that day.31 It was clear that although anti-racial justice networks had preplanned the spamming of certain hashtags to decrease their efficacy, they had not anticipated #FergusonTaughtMe, leaving it fairly undisturbed. It has since become de rigueur for users tweeting about racial justice to receive waves of harassment. White supremacists have also proliferated on Twitter, periodically trying their hand at fake accounts but mostly just harassing other users.32

As the 2016 presidential elections approached, Gamergate participants began turning their efforts to the benefit of Trump. Two high-profile Gamergaters became champions of Trump, as Gamergate morphed and integrated into the “Alt-Right.” Right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos built his online profile through participation in and support for Gamergate, shortly thereafter becoming a writer for Bannon’s far-right website Breitbart.33 While at Breitbart, Yiannopoulos solicited input on his writing for Andrew “weev” Auernheimer, a hacker and open white supremacist who was the system administrator for the neo-Nazi website The Daily Stormer.34 Mike Cernovich, a lawyer who started out as a blogger writing about how to pick-up women, also moved from being a vocal supporter of Gamegate, which he once called
“the most important battle of the culture war this century,” to proliferating anti-Clinton conspiracy theories.\(^35\) Self-identified member of the Alt-Right, Cernovich played a major role in proliferating the #PizzaGate conspiracy, which held that Hillary Clinton’s campaign manager John Podesta operated a child sex ring out of the basement of Comet Ping Pong, a Washington, DC, pizzeria (in a building that has no basement).\(^36\)

Bannon, Cernovich, Yiannopoulos, and others were able to channel the existing anger, misogyny, and racism of the (predominantly, though by no means exclusively) white men dwelling in the dark corners of the internet. It is easy to see the synergy between Gamergate’s distain for “SJWs” and Trump’s rejection of “political correctness.” The bile of 4Chan, 8Chan, and Reddit users, of PUAs and men’s rights activists, and of white supremacists coalesced and were channeled in support of the Trump political platform. In the wake of the 2016 election, there has been a handful of articles pointing to Gamergate as precursor to what is now called the Alt-Right.\(^37\) But, at the time, few outside the networks where it occurred took Gamergate seriously.

Among other activities, these “alt-right” networks attack and harass people of color and women on social media, with particular attention to women of color. This was most severe on Twitter because the platform has been reluctant to curb such behaviors. Such attacks make it more difficult for marginalized people to use Twitter as a counter-public, which is clearly the intention. Alt-right users not only respond to other users with abusive language and vulgar or heinous images, but also coordinate in large swarms, often using bots to amplify the attacks on their targets. The participants at the center of this project have gotten good at identifying and dealing with such attacks, though it still takes a toll in time and energy. While such harassment campaigns are now largely anticipated, what has come as more of a surprise is the extent to which Russian intelligence seems to have participated in or at least amplified such hostilities.

Russians? Seriously?

There were warnings about Russian interference in the 2016 elections prior to election day, but those warnings went largely unheeded, and it was not until after the election that the full extent of Russia’s operation and reliance on social media was widely recognized. Russian intelligence
used Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to spread misinformation and exacerbate existing social and especially racial tensions in the United States. Russian accounts on Facebook included Blacktivist and Black Matters, both of which posted pro-Black content and information about protests; and Twitter accounts had handles such as black4unity, BlackerTheBerr5, BlackGirls2017, and BLMSoldier. A study of Russian Twitter accounts by Leo G. Stewart, Ahmer Arif, and Kate Starbird showed that they exploited the polarization of digital networks and created ideologically tailored content to inject into aligned clusters.

The most recent reports have indicated that Russia targeted Black Americans with messages designed to demobilize the Black vote, often advocating for Black voters to stay home or to vote for Green Party candidate Jill Stein. It is difficult to know how successful these campaigns were. Black voter turnout decreased 7 percent from the previous election, a significant drop. However, the 2016 Black turnout of 59.6 percent is only slightly lower than the pre-Obama turnout from 2004. Thus, there is a compelling argument to be made that the campaigns had little effect on regular voters and that the record 2008 and 2012 turnout was an anomaly resulting from the excitement generated by having a Black candidate on the ballot. Further, it is important to remember that 2016 was the first election since the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act in 2013 and that there had been a sustained effort to close polling places, limit early voting, require voter IDs, and place other barriers to voting that would discourage or prevent Black Americans from voting.

It is also difficult to know how widely Black Americans were taken in by these fake accounts. Kevin Winstead, in his analysis of the Russian-run Twitter account @Crystal1Johnson, finds that the account never called for specific action or promoted rallies and never tweeted radical political critiques. Thus, while the account was convincing enough to infiltrate and successfully engage with Black Twitter, it participated mostly in ways that reiterated common political discourses in Black American communities, only occasionally pushing out a Kremlin-approved post. Thus, it is still unclear what impact these Russian accounts had on the networks they penetrated, even though it is clear that some of the accounts were fairly believable.

Still, Black activists tend to maintain a healthy skepticism about newcomers, given the history of government informants and agent pro-
vocateurs penetrating past movements. Between 2014 and 2016, it was common to see suspicion about possible infiltration of the Movement for Black Lives, often citing the mid-twentieth-century FBI operations that targeted activists in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. This suspicion played out with the fake Facebook account of Blacktivist, a page that had over 360,000 likes, which was more than the official Black Lives Matter page. While the page did a good job at maintaining believability, real activists remained skeptical. The Blacktivist page particularly targeted issues around the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, yet no one in the city seemed to know who was running the account. Heber Brown III, a Baltimore pastor and organizer, contacted the page and had an exchange with the person running it, which he later posted on Facebook. Brown thought Blacktivist was someone from out of town looking to exploit the cause. Activist Jamye Wooten thought perhaps it was an undercover police officer acting as surveillance. While it is doubtful anyone suspected Russian intelligence, these accounts, despite the number of followers or likes, do not go unquestioned.

Further, we now know that Russian sock puppet accounts were involved in stoking tensions between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders supporters during the contentious 2016 primary, during which time many Twitter users complained of harassment from professed Sanders supporters. While it is indisputable that some of the over-zealous Sanders supporters were earnest and legitimate, many in the network I write about here suggested the involvement of manufactured sock puppet accounts and bots. They noted the Sanders supporters, nicknamed “Bernie Bros,” used tactics that were remarkably similar to the campaigns coordinated by Gamergate and other anti-SJW networks and suggested that some of the Bernie Bros were likely part of the kind of 4Chan and Reddit coordinated harassment campaigns that had been in operation for years. But even as there was some suspicion that these online interactions stemmed from a malicious source and were not entirely organic, no one suspected that Russian intelligence had set up the accounts.

While it is not known how many of the accounts defending Sanders were Russian, it is apparent that some such accounts amplified existing discourses that have long been at the heart of racial tensions in the progressive movement. Because of this, and despite Russian participation, I stand by my analysis of #BernieSoBlack. My aim was to investigate how
this network uses technologies to negotiate their experiences as racialized subjects. Russian accounts that participated in #BernieSoBlack did not create novel discourses, which would have had little effect. Instead they recycled longstanding tropes that were familiar to the participants in the network I write about. Thus, for the users who are the focus on this project—who I am confident are not Russian plants—this was a real exigency, to which they responded with strategies and discourses that accurately reflect their attitudes regardless of their interlocutors.

Although Congress has released a list of fake Russian-operated Twitter accounts, it is unclear as to how much traction these accounts actually had with Black users. While the sock puppet accounts have been deleted, it is still possible to search their username and see the tweets @-replied to them. There appears to be little interaction with the accounts or predominantly automated retweets or replies. Given the centrality of conversational engagement in the Black Twitter network, this strikes me as a sign that these accounts were only superficially involved in the network. This anecdotal evidence also leaves me with questions about the effectiveness of the mimicry in fooling Black Americans. A deeper, systematic analysis would be fruitful. It seems quite possible that Russian accounts had a much narrower range of behaviors available to them to pass effectively in Black networks. Black Americans, who have more experience using alternative information networks and a historically necessitated skepticism of unknown entities, likely possess skills that could bolster the broader US public’s ability to vet information.

Further, as such hostilities and antagonisms have intensified, I have seen a shift toward increased sequestration of networked enclaves. It was during 2015, when presidential primaries were in full swing—coinciding with more open racial hostilities, a contentious primary between Sanders and Clinton, and an intense Russian intelligence operation—that podcasts began creating closed Facebook groups, and it was in the aftermath of the 2016 election that more and more people in the network made their Twitter accounts private, allowing only approved followers to see their tweets and preventing retweeting. This strategy preserves access to their existing network but prevents the addition of new followers and limits the circulation of their posts. Twitter has shown little will to curb harassment on their platform, and I anticipate that more sequestra-
tion efforts will continue, with the behavior of this network presaging larger digital media trends.

The Interstitial Hustle

Another change that has occurred since I have completed my research is that TWiB! has scaled back operations significantly, so that by the end of 2017, it had returned to its origins as a largely solo project of its founder, Elon James White. The reasons for this are complex, though overall TWiB!’s trajectory underscores the instability of the interstitial modes of production upon which endeavors like it are built.

Prior to 2017, TWiB! employed production techniques that are common among independent digital content creators. Media studies scholars have chronicled the financial precarity, the ad hoc and improvisational production process, and the necessity for creators to fulfill multiple production roles simultaneously. This practice closely resembles what Hamid Naficy has termed an “interstitial mode production” in his work on filmmakers living in exile. Used “to operate both within and astride the cracks and fissures of the system, benefiting from its contradictions, anomalies, and heterogeneity,” this mode of production is deployed by marginalized creatives who are outside traditional industry structures and lack access to those resources, and it manifests in three concrete areas: language, financing, and labor.

For now, I am bracketing language in favor of focusing on financing and labor. Financially, creators of a project such as a podcast must invest their own money, raise funds from private and public sources, and/or make use of the resources available by working in “technical or routine capacities in the media and entertainment industries.” Essentially, creators have to hustle, paying out of pocket and finding donations and investments where and how they can, and, rather than having clear labor roles, those involved in the project take on multiple roles, often simultaneously, as needed. As Naficy observes, the interstitial mode of production is characterized by a “multiplication or accumulation of labor (especially on behalf of the director) instead of a division of labor.” Thus, the main creator of a project, White in the case of TWiB!, often does all the work that large-scale corporate media have entire infrastructures to accomplish, and so while the interstitial mode
of production allows the projects of marginalized creators to be made, it is exceedingly difficult to maintain indefinitely.

At its height, TWiB! produced *TWiB! Prime* and *TWiB! in the Morning* four days a week, Monday through Thursday, along with six weekly podcasts plus a show on FreeSpeechTV. This was financed, in addition to what White paid for personally, through audience donations and, starting in 2014, subscriptions, as well as small ad spots from companies like Bevel Shaving, revenue as an Amazon affiliate, and occasionally producing media for organizations such as Netroots Nation. As with most independent media projects, TWiB! always suffered from financial precarity. TWiB! personnel worked hard and produced a great deal of high quality content, at first for free and eventually for pay, though never enough for anyone to quit their “day job.” They did this largely because they believed in the project, though some also wanted to learn skills to move into the media industry. People can sustain that for a period of time, but not indefinitely. A finite project, such as a film or a web series with a set number of episodes in a season, can be produced using an interstitial mode, but it is difficult to produce a podcast four days a week indefinitely that way.

Of course, the hustle to create these media is intended to to achieve sustainable and monetized media production, either as an independent entity or through partnership with existing media companies. That the internet offers potential opportunity for enterprising content creators to bypass industry gatekeepers is apparent, but, despite commonly held beliefs, monetizing online content is extremely difficult, and online visibility does not readily translate into financial prosperity. Even on YouTube, the platform with the clearest way for content creators to monetize via ad revenue, most creators make hardly anything. While a channel can be in the top 3 percent of channels that garner 85 percent of the views, it is not likely generate enough revenue to put its creator above the poverty line. Wildly popular platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, and Soundcloud have yet to find a way to turn a profit. What are the chances that users fare better than the platforms that hosts their content? This means that the vast majority of online independent media projects could forever remain in the interstitial hustle, which seems to be unsustainable, particular at the scale of TWiB!, which at times had as many as a dozen people involved.
While TWiB! grew quickly and faced challenges due to its reliance on a mode of production that was ill-suited to support the scale of the endeavor, the other Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts have grown more slowly. They have also taken to crafting a monetization strategy based on maximizing the support of a small but dedicated audience. The most successful of these has been The Black Guy Who Tips. Rod and Karen started their show in 2010, while both were working fulltime jobs. In early 2013, Rod was laid off, and they decided to try to monetize the podcast with what became their freemium service. Accordingly, the ten most recent episodes of The Black Guy Who Tips podcast were free and available through various podcatcher apps and an RSS feed, while early TBGWT episodes and their new premium shows—The Nerd Off, Balls Deep Sports, and Medium Talk—were subscription-only at a cost of $15 a month. The plan worked, and within a month they exceeded their goal of one hundred subscribers, bringing in enough money for Rod to make the podcast his fulltime job. Over the last five years, the franchise has continued to grow, adding subscribers and receiving regular ad placements from companies such as Tweeked Audio, Bevel, Adam and Eve, Loot Crate, and Shadow Dog Productions.

Other podcasts networks have also begun moving to a freemium model. As of 2018, both the Movie Trailer Review (MTR) Network and Where’s My 40 Acres? have freemium services. The MTR Network maintains five free podcasts—Insanity Check, Character Corner, Secret Sauce, Super Tuesday, and Unanimous Decision—that are available via podcatchers and RSS and increasingly via YouTube. Additionally, for an $8 monthly subscription fee, subscribers get access to nine premium shows, including a science show called Molecules and Shit, a book club style show for comic books called Comic Book Club, and two nostalgia-based movie reviews of older movies called Nostalgia Review and Scarestalgia. MTR shows also receive ad placements from many of the same advertisers as TBGWT. While its content consists heavily of audio podcasts, MTR also maintains a robust website featuring written reviews and commentary and is introducing short videos via YouTube. Phenom Blak, of Where’s My 40 Acres? has also joined MTR and works with Kriss to do reviews and create content, as the MTR network seems to be taking a turn toward hope labor, the investment of time and energy with the goal of building a professional and monetizable endeavor.
Where’s My 40 Acres? uses a similar model. While WM40A? continues to produce free shows—Where’s My 40 Acres?, EarGasm, and BoobTube—for a monthly subscription fee, fans also get access to six premium shows, including review shows such as the super hero–focused Podvengers and the action film–focused Say Yes to Death, as well as Wifey Material, a show featuring Phenom Blak’s fiancée, Ashley, and Behind the Ratchet, which includes conversations among the hosts before and after the flagship show. For premium subscriptions WM40A? uses Patreon, a website that enables people to become patrons of creators by pledging a monthly fee, and allows for tiers of pledges of increasing size, with rewards increasing as amounts increase (similar to GoFundMe). WM40A? lists pledges from $2 to $100, with $10 being the minimum for full premium access and larger amounts adding extra rewards such as picking the topic of an episode, having co-host Deirdre send the subscriber a “special box” of goodies (which often contains baked goods), or being a guest on the show. Like that of MTR, WM40A?’s content is primarily audio podcasts, but, in association with its premium show Craft Beer Killahs, WM40A? has begun posting beer reviews on Instagram, featuring an image of the beer with a description and review in the comments.

Other podcasts are also using Patreon. 3 Guys On, featuring DC-based comedians Randolph Terrance, Andy Kline (who is white), and Tim Miller, offers a weekly premium episode, in addition to a regular free episode, for $3 a month. The Black Astronaut Podcast (BAP) Network started producing premium content in early 2017, offering Patreon tiers ranging from $3 to access past BAP episodes to $10 to participate in a monthly live-stream chat. The Cold Slither Podcast Network (CSPN), which as of 2018 produced seventeen different podcasts (though not all always in regular production), is also on Patreon offering tiers of $1, $3, and $5, with $3 being the minimum for premium access to “lost podcast episodes, special interviews, behind-the-scenes features and outtakes and more.” CSPN also hosts nine affiliate links on their website, including Amazon, Blue Apron, and Audible, under the heading “Keep Our Podcasts Free.” When listeners make a purchase, sometimes with an associated discount, CSPN receives a small fee.

The Patreon accounts yield only a few hundred dollars a month, mainly to help with covering production costs such as equipment and
hosting. For example, the Black Astronauts’ Patreon reads, “Hitting our goal of 500 dollars a month would allow me to purchase better equipment, pay our web hosting fees and allow me to focus on the podcast network full time. This would also allow me to expand into premium content.”\textsuperscript{54} WM40A?, which has a Patreon goal of $1,500 a month, tells fans, “Nobody would be able to quit their day job, BUT we would be able to get an equipment upgrade, more designs for shirts, hoodies, socks, and tumblers, a much needed upgrade to the website, and a travel fund for live events like NegroCon, Essence Festival, Dragon Con, Podcon, and more. We want to bring 40 Acres to your city.”\textsuperscript{55}

These podcasts share heavily overlapping audiences, and their strategy seems to be to produce large amounts of content, covering a variety of topics, to super-serve that audience. The strong sense of social connection and collectivity has played a major role in supporting the Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts up until this point. Audiences are loyal and donate for equipment or travel needs. Listeners have even donated to help hosts in personal financial crises. TBGWT has noted on more than one occasion that guests on the show report a significant benefit from such appearances, since TBGWT audience members then buy what they are promoting or attend their shows, and the support they receive significantly outstrips what they receive from appearances on larger more mainstream shows.

However, it remains to be seen how much revenue these strategies can generate. Though the scale of these podcasts allows them to avoid some of the pitfalls of the interstitial hustle, even after anywhere from five to ten years of podcasting, most are still working toward covering their costs. Their Patreon accounts range from 11 to 184 patrons. Barring greater growth, producing premium shows for such a small audience may not have much longevity. Further, though the subscription fees are relatively low, listeners will only support so many podcasts, as costs add up. Hence, the freemium model will only be viable for a finite number of podcasts. It also remains to be seen how the repeal of net neutrality might impact these content creators, as internet service providers become free to block and throttle content, most likely the that of sites that don’t pay to avoid slowed download speeds.
Conclusion

Despite the mutation of colorblind discourses, the persistent harassment on Twitter, and the challenges of financial sustainability for content creators, the network remains vital. Even as Twitter becomes increasingly hostile, with alt-right harassers bolstered by Russian intelligence, it still serves as a crucial resource. The Black Twitter network has been cultivated over the course of nearly a decade now. Many of the connections made there are longstanding and have proliferated to other platforms and even moved offline. Users have well-honed strategies for negotiating and mitigating harassment and abuse, and their transplatform connections make many of the subnetwork “neighborhoods” of Black Twitter less reliant on the platform.

The podcast Chitlin’ Circuit continues to flourish, though they haven’t referred to themselves with this term for a while now. New podcasts and podcast networks, featuring many familiar and beloved individuals, continue to emerge from the network. As of this writing, Aaron Rand Freeman and Dacia Mitchell have founded their own podcast network—Unreasonable Fridays (UNF)—which features six podcasts. N’Jaila Rhee, former host of TWiB!’s sex-positive podcast TWiB! after Dark now hosts UNF’s Cuntcast, and Shane Paul Neil, who worked with TWiB! in a variety of capacities, now hosts SPN Writes, which is a short podcast featuring Neil’s writing and stories about his life. A range of familiar guests cycle through UNF’s podcast episodes—from Rashanii from Single Simulcast reading Neil’s poems to TBGWT’s Karen and Three Fif’s co-host Justin Jones. Imani Gandy is now the co-host of Rewire’s legal podcast Boom! Lawyered, while Dara M Wilson, a longtime contributor to TWiB! and co-host of TWiB! Prime in its last couple of years, is now co-host and co-producer of the video series and podcast, Next Big Thing with Courtney and Dara. MTR’s premium show Molecules and Shit is hosted by long-time network participants Coqui Negra and P Funk, whose participation via the channels for listener engagement created by TWiB! and the other Chitlin’ Circuit podcasts often made them interlocutors and contributors to the shows and the community.

Black users will continue to innovate and adapt, as they always have, as the cultural and technological landscape shifts. The people who comprise this networked public continue to expand, adapt, and craft their
technological space. It’s difficult to say what will come—with the resurgence of overt white supremacy, the hard-right-wing control of the government, and the possibility of even greater corporate control over web content. But, participants in this network will continue to reimagine the affordances of the technologies available to them so that they can keep each other as safe and sane as possible.