

PART 4

Digital Society and New Social Dilemmas





Digital Racism

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INTRODUCTION

Racism is a common, if regrettable, feature of everyday life on the Digital Age. Every day, social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, filter millions of racist comments from their streams (Warner and Hirschberg, 2012). Websites such as 4chan have become places where anti-Black and anti-Semitic content can be found (Glaser et al., 2002). Digital communities for white nationalists, like Stormfront, have attracted thousands of followers (Daniels, 2009). Journalists will periodically write about how law enforcement officers participate in private Facebook groups that allow them to express racist views (Associated Press 2021; Carless 2019).

These examples raise important questions about racial conflict in modern society. What role do digital technologies, such as social media and the World Wide Web, have in hosting or amplifying racial antagonism? Addressing this question, we review a

growing scholarly literature that documents and assesses the presence of racism in digital environments. Our review focuses four distinct processes that occur: expression and diffusion of racist ideas, antagonistic behaviours such as cyber bullying, the establishment of online racist communities and the use of digital resources for real-life racist action.

First, racist opinions and attitudes are expressed and diffused in virtual media such as social media posts, email and websites. Racially antagonistic texts can be posted to public fora such as Reddit threads, Twitter feeds, Facebook groups and other cyberspaces that allow these messages to be publicly viewable without restriction. Second, we examine literature that analyses antagonistic behaviours such as trolling, bullying and other forms of harassment. Racist texts can diffuse throughout online networks as other users 'retweet' or repost them. Third, we review scholarship on the organisation of racist attitudes and behaviours in digital platforms – that is, we look at racism as a set of

ideas that can sustain a community. Lastly, we look at the transition from the online world to the physical world – how online racist actors and their ideologies can mobilise these attitudes into actual behaviors.

THE CONCEPT OF RACE AND RACISM

Here, we define this chapter's basic terms and concepts. Racism is usually defined by scholars as discriminatory and prejudicial behaviours and expressions, as well as ingrained ideologies, rooted in the structure of social hierarchies that derived from social categories of race (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin and Elias, 2013; Omi and Winant, 2015). Racism stems from a power dynamic between an advantageous racial group implicating subordination towards a disadvantaged racial group (Clair and Denis, 2015). Racism is therefore inherently exclusionary and a function of dominance. In discussions of racism, scholars tend to make a distinction between 1) explicit forms of racism found in unobservable situations such as with hate speech and racial slurs, and 2) covert racism, such as the implicit bias often found in workplace or hiring practices, racism in medical practices or other concealed forms of disadvantages that minority groups experience (Ortiz, 2020). Racism negatively shapes life chances and circumstances among groups of people – namely, minorities – who hold less power (Doane, 2006; Solomos, 1996).

Social scientists tend to understand racial categories as a social construction rather than a stable or tangible biological or physical category (Andreasen, 2000; Hartigan, 2008; Morning, 2007, 2014; Omi and Winant, 2015). Biological arguments about race are often offered by genomic social scientists who find genetic strains in the human genome that serve to confirm ancestral traces and 'clinal classes' that reaffirm racial categories (Shiao et al., 2012). Nonetheless,

sociological theories often regard racial distinctions as a reflection of changing culture (Omi and Winant, 2015). The broad idea behind this theoretical framework is that there is no biological evidence that traces racial distinctions, and that ideological categories of race are manipulated in the context of social relationships in order to achieve social distinction or confirm social categorisation – like othering outgroups and developing a sense of community with ingroups (Fields, 1990; Omi and Winant 1993). Roberts (2011) argues that race is a political grouping: 'race is very real as a political grouping of human beings and has actual consequences for people's health, wealth, social status, reputation, and opportunities in life' (p. 5). In this line of thought, race has no common genetic thread that allows us to distinguish people as anything other than the human race. The idea that phenotypical appearance is used to segregate groups of people into 'racial' categories is a political move – this move is precisely the way in which inequality can be perpetuated and how life chances are different for distinct racial groups (Roberts, 2011).

The way that racial categories are expressed in our social world affects how we interact and show affect towards different groups of people (Omi and Winant, 2015). In other words, how we unconsciously categorise those we interact with into racial groups have real meaning and consequences to the different ways we operate in daily life. Through these racial distinctions, we see resulting attitudes and behaviours that encompass racism. Contemporary scholarship sees racism as a structural phenomenon (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Ray, 2019) rather than an individual pathology or an explicit ideological system of racial antagonism formed in individual interaction (Omi and Winant, 2015). In a seminal statement, Bonilla-Silva (1997) defines racism through social systems that

refers to societies in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or

racism [and] [...] the placement of people in racial categories involves some form of hierarchy that produce definite social relations between the races. (p. 469)

Through this framework, racism is recognised as a phenomenon in which dominance and subjugation make up the organisation of racialised groups having advantages and disadvantages, while also fixing for intersectional effects, such as class and gender. Doane (2003) extends racism's hierarchical effect to include legitimising the inherent meaning of the inequalities – therefore explaining acts of exclusion, discrimination and exploitation. Importantly, racism can take the form of implicit behaviours of discrimination, microaggressions, veiled prejudice, and the like (Clair and Denis, 2015; Sniderman et al., 1991). We argue that racism is the content, while hate speech and expression is the means of transmitting these ideas online. Acts of racism are not only distinguished by overt and covert forms of racism, but also differentiated by when these acts happen in our physical world and in our new age virtual world.

ONLINE RACISM

Although much of the literature on racism serves to understand racism in the real-world¹ dimension, the expression of online racist attitudes is more nuanced and requires different frameworks to understand the ways that racism spreads. Bonilla-Silva (2017) discusses the proliferation of a new kind of racism in the post-Civil Rights era dubbed 'colorblind racism'. Colorblind racism refers to the covert forms of racism that on the surface level do not appear racist (e.g., opposing affirmative action, the All Lives Matter movement), yet perpetuate inequality based on racism while feigning neutrality to race-based motivations. Ortiz (2020) argues that while overt racism is observed less in everyday interactions, even despite the resurgence

of overt racism after Trump's 2016 election win for presidency (and the subsequent visibility of racists in 'Trumpamerica'), overt racism is rampant in online spaces.

To clarify, online hate is not a novel form of social interaction; rather, it is a novel extension of racism in a way that racialised expressions and behaviours online are amplifications of offline racism. The online space is a tool used, and a place for, the further enactment of racialised harm to online communities of users (De Kosnik, 2020; Faulkner and Bliuc, 2018). As such, the origin and location of internet users (i.e., historical context) is heavily intertwined with the resulting affect and behaviours of online racism that is observed. Factors such as colonialism, racial climate, war and atrocities all provide important contextual grounding to examining behaviours and expressions of racism online, although they are beyond the scope of this general review of digital phenomenon.

Nonetheless, digital platforms hold incredible importance to social interaction in the twenty-first century, as technologies and databases are now more socialised through networks of users with speed, breadth and depth (Lupton, 2015). Interactions online are also subject to inequalities that pervade real-life situations (Durrheim et al., 2015; Kang, 2000). As stated earlier, racist ideologies in online spaces function in a different framework from that depicted by the social 'rules' or norms in our face-to-face realities. However, how racism is perpetuated in the real-world dimension is both extended and expanded online. Virtual spaces are created by people, and thus algorithms reproduce prejudices of those who create these algorithms and provide algorithms with data (Noble, 2018). For example, Noble (2018) points to Google's algorithms frontloading racial stereotypes when searching for content relating to minority groups – the interface predominantly centres white norms and whiteness in conjunction with prejudicing marginalised people. Algorithms in the criminal justice sector produced racialised

results that bias predictive policing technologies based on the skewedness of the data fed into these predictive models (Kleinberg et al., 2018; O'Donnell, 2019).

Online racism is manifested on a wide spectrum – from the more explicit cyberhate (Douglas et al., 2005) all the way to instances of online microaggressions (Clark et al., 2011). Bliuc et al. (2018) synthesise a decade of literature to dissect online racism with individual racist actors and then how racist groups use online networks for racist propagation. There are differences between isolated actors and racist groups – namely, that individuals perpetuate racial attitudes and behaviours as acts (e.g., microaggressions, racist remarks), whereas groups attempt to create subcultures and a sense of identity through online racial hate (Bliuc et al., 2018). Nonetheless, racial formation processes in technological spaces must centre the inequality structures that exists in our non-technical world, as research argues that racism transfers from physical space to the online space (Daniels, 2013).

Racist hierarchies and structures that exist online mirror our real-world inequalities (Bonilla-Silva, 1997), showing how the internet reproduces racial bias seen in the offline world through algorithms and online interfaces (Jackson, 2018; Noble, 2018; Sandvig et al., 2016). For example, searching 'Black on white crime' on Google brings up white supremacist propaganda and stories that can be perceived as confirming the criminality of Black people, yet no immediate links to research done by professors, anti-racist groups and other scientific sources are at the forefront (Noble, 2018). Algorithms work in a 'black box' that largely refrains us from knowing what exactly factors into machine learning when it calculates task or results (Sandvig et al., 2016). Additionally, because people are the ones creating these algorithm-teaching machines what to look for, how to look for them, what to produce when presented with specific information, it's clear that an individual's or group's inherent bias

contributes to the product of algorithms (Noble, 2018). As a result, racial political structures continue to govern inequality hierarchies in cyberspace (Kang, 2000). How racist attitudes and beliefs are mirrored, but also extended and expressed through online pages and social media's reaches is the focal point of the arguments and general framework to be laid out in the following section.

EXPRESSIONS OF RACIST OPINIONS ONLINE

Online spaces are frequently conduits for racist expression of opinions (Bliuc et al. 2018; Durrheim et al., 2015; Gray, 2014) particularly because of their disconnected nature from face-to-face expression. While racism is mirrored onto online spaces from the offline world, anonymity can extend the ways that racism is present in cyberspace because it is relatively low-cost and low-risk to present an unconventional attitude through an invisible user (Sandvig et al., 2016). Users online can dissociate from their real ascribed identities and hide behind anonymity and invisibility through online accounts (Suler, 2014). Through this mechanism, racism is 'unmasked' and is allowed to proliferate (Eschmann, 2020). One limitation of this unmasking effect is the lack of clarity as to who is behind this mask. Stephens-Davidowitz (2017) shows that while expressions in the form of online searches or other digitally traced behaviours can be measured, little is clearly known about the person behind the computer who is doing the act.

Racism can be expressed quite blatantly in public social media sites such as Twitter, Reddit and Facebook because these platforms vary in how they administer policies on racial hate speech and site administrators inconsistently apply regulations (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2017). Not surprisingly, the attempts to control racist speech has triggered a debate about what is considered

'free speech' and what can be considered 'hate speech', and the delineation separating the two is unclear (Congressional Research Service, 2019). These social media sites are often careful about who they regulate and what they censor, because it depends on how the expression in question relates to a clear case of hate speech rather than an expression of individual opinion (McNair, 2017).

Matamoros-Fernandez and Farkas (2021) conducted an analysis of published research on hate speech and racism on social media and found that Twitter was the most often studied platform for racist expression. There are an estimated up to 10,000 tweets that contain a racial or ethnic slur per day – 1 in every 15,000 tweets (Bartlett et al., 2014). Facebook and Reddit and YouTube comments also house racist speech (Matamoros-Fernandez and Farkas, 2021). Chaudhry (2015) assesses communities on Twitter that use racist speech by following racial hashtags (the use of the '#' symbol), using geo-tagged tweets to locate where racist posts are centralised, and even simply using a word search to measure the occurrence of racial slurs with common keywords.

Racist expressions can be found in the context of online discussion forums. A popular online forum, Reddit, experienced the rise of hate speech within their more compartmentalised threads ('subreddits') so much so that they removed several subreddits in 2015 in an attempt to curtail offensive and inflammatory discussions (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017). Nonetheless, Chandrasekharan et al. (2017) explored Reddit and found that hate speech still appears in other, less overt subreddits, regardless of the ban on the isolated hate threads, although it worked to subvert the behaviour somewhat. Steinfeldt et al. (2010) measured racist attitudes towards Native Americans within online forums and found patterns of overt expressions of discrimination and hatred (such as stereotypes and Native American slurs). These trends can explain the processes surrounding expressions of racial hate such that we can study

reasons that individuals gravitate to specific platforms and continue to express racist attitudes and beliefs. The openness, anonymity and the ability for other racists to be surrounded by and validated by like-minded racists online allows the proliferation of racial hate to pervade social media spaces (Glaser et al., 2002). Racists and white supremacist actors depend on a community where they feel that their beliefs are shared and understood, and it is within this need that online spaces can reach a wider population and connect racists with others like them (Ezekiel, 1995; Melican and Dixon, 2008).

Overt racism is more explicitly seen and measured in online communication, but more covert forms of racism can appear. These masked expressions are not outright racially violent, but still add to the hostile digital environment (Georgiou, 2020). Bonilla-Silva's (2017) colorblind racism framework helps to understand these more indirect racist expression. Colorblind racist remarks are masked as thoughts and beliefs that do not regard race, yet have themes of racism ingrained in the meaning behind the expression (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). For example, civilians believing that overpoliced minority neighbourhoods are appropriate because these communities commit more crime is colorblind racism – prejudice stemming from ingrained and oblivious racial bias. Tynes and Markoe (2010) find that individuals who believed in a more colorblind racism ideology – namely, that racial appropriation practices are not inherently racist – were less likely to call out racist remarks online and were more likely to be unbothered by racial discrimination in online spaces. Individuals justify their expression of racist opinions by veiling it as exercising freedom of speech and characterising their opinions as political in context, not racial (White and Crandall 2017). In this digital age, what is classified as racist in online platforms is more unrecognisable than in previous eras (Georgiou, 2020), partly due to the deniability of racism in a post-Civil Rights society and also due to colourblind

racism – in other words, how subversive racist expressions online is more subtly racist than overt forms of the racial content.

Eschmann (2020) argues that while colourblind racism is more prominent in face-to-face interactions such as unconscious bias or subtle microaggressions, online platforms' removal of the identity of the perpetrator making the racist remarks opens the door for more direct racial language and discriminatory comments. This removed empathy allows users to be more racially charged and vocal about their explicit racial opinions on issues surrounding a racial group or a racially charged event (Coffey and Woolworth, 2004). The online social media space is no stranger to racism, sexism and, more generally, expressions labelled as online hate, due to the rise of social media platforms with unregulated and open access spaces like 4chan, bulletin board system sites and platforms that use thread designation such as 'r/' or known racist community hashtags (e.g., #ProudBoys, #whitepower, #GamerGate) (Shepherd et al., 2015). Lack of personal accountability and the interconnective potential for online actors shape the presence and growth of racism online. Once racist expressions are typed and sent out in the open, these remarks make up what scholars term as hate speech or trolling, and these behaviours have consequences for the victims of the racial hate.

RACIST BEHAVIOURS ONLINE

There is a fine line between the expression of racist attitudes and behaviours that occur online. In this section, racist behaviours are defined as more intentional internet behaviours that are associated with a theme of racial discrimination and racial hate, such as cyberbullying, trolling and replies or reposted tweets in the context of Twitter – namely, the active engagement with racialised behaviours rather than the passive consumption of it. Studies that have examined how racist

speech proliferates in online spaces use chat rooms, live interactions, such as in video gaming, and interfaces where users can comment and reply without much regulation or barriers to what they can say (Daniels, 2009; Ortiz, 2020). Social scientists often study this phenomenon through interviewing those who fall victim to cyberhate. Through interviews, they examine under what conditions racial hate appears in interactions and how victims cope with verbal or linguistic abuse, and what strategies they use to survive in a racist space.

Internet trolling – a behaviour specific to the online world in which a user actively provokes other users into arguments or verbal fights on hot button issues and topics – emerged in the twenty-first century as the internet revolution took place (James and Jansen, 2002). Trolling began as an antagonistic behaviour for the enjoyment of a general audience, much like a practical joke where children set off an uptight adult; but during the 2010s, trolling has taken a more serious meaning where instigators are provoking in more harmful and vitriolic ways (Bishop, 2014). This disconnect between what trolling was versus what it has developed into now – racism masked as dismissible rough play – has downplayed the very real effects of a new form of cyberbullying which is marked by racism and sexism (Mantilla, 2013). Furthermore, the structural set-up of computer-mediated communication (CMC) spaces such as forums or threads in which people can respond to each other's posts make cyber trolling more effective and rampant through the lack of empathic barrier between users, as well as regulations that police these online antagonistic interactions (Herring et al., 2002).

A study by Criss et al. (2020) reveals the echo-chamber effect of Twitter that is characteristic of similar interactive social media sites, where users are more likely to post racially charged and offensive viewpoints based on both anonymity and how similarly opinionated users serve as supportive

agitators to racist remarks made. The reaffirming and cyclical effect of racism amidst a largely deindividualised experience is widely researched by scholars exploring the proliferation of racism in digital spaces (Ezekiel, 1995; Keum and Miller, 2018; Suler, 2004). Researchers have also found that former President Donald Trump and other political topics were discussed in connection with racist comments on Twitter (Criss et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, the demeanour of Trump on Twitter created a shift in the discourse of politics online into a much more uncivil and antagonistic, and often racially charged with virulent hate, as other users that align with his politics surfaced (Ott, 2017). Racialised behaviours in cyberspace thrive on example and community, in which other similar users reaffirm the social acceptability of both overt and implicit racist expression and behaviours.

Furthermore, racial prejudice also exists online in the form of discrimination in interactions like dating sites and in chat rooms (Callander et al., 2016; Glaser et al., 2002). In these spaces, a more interpersonal style of interaction is susceptible to targeting users by their race and other marginalised aspects of their identities. Specifically in men-seeking-men interactions on online dating software, experiences of racism range from subtle to harmful, explicit forms of racial and sexual discrimination (Callander et al., 2016). Discrimination based on the intersection of racial or ethnic identity, gender and sexual orientation is frequently discussed in real-world interactions (Bany et al., 2014; Fisman et al., 2007) where Asian men score lower on dating desirability (Kao et al., 2018), while in different contexts, white men are more highly desired than other racial groups like Black men or Latino men (Han, 2007).

Racial preferences breed racial discrimination for those who are disadvantaged by sexual preferences and this transfers to online dating spaces (Bedi, 2015; Feliciano et al., 2009) – namely, online spaces reproduce the racial hierarchy stemming from whiteness

that is omnipresent in our physical social structures (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Mason, 2016). Because dating sites ask for racial category and often depend on profile pictures of users to assist who connects with who, racial stereotypes and discrimination in dating we see in the non-digital space can also transfer to – and is exacerbated in – virtual, more impersonal spaces (Bedi, 2015). Chat rooms further mimic spaces that are conducive to meeting other users, often with romantic or sexual motives, but sometimes with the intent to connect with same-race others, which creates opportunities for racialised discriminatory behaviours towards marginalised users (Tynes et al., 2004).

Racialised behaviours are more rampant in online settings where unregulated speech is allowed to take place (Roberts, 2019). An additional effect coming from the lack of racial speech regulation is the affirmation of racialised behaviours and stances by users through actions like sharing, ‘quote retweeting’, or reposting (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013). Twitter sees frequent racist comments and discourse – Twitter users often reply to one another – with a high use of racial slurs that are almost casual in nature (i.e., in normal dialogue when summarising one’s day or experiences) (Bartlett et al., 2014; Chaudry, 2015). Racial discrimination sent in the form of a tweet can be liked and reshared to one’s own Twitter feed and Twitter followers, in which the thread functions as a traceable and selective list of opinions that further validate the original racialised behaviour (Ott, 2017). Users can also link to other sites, include pictures and videos, and other impulsive content to further push racialised discourse in vitriolic and devaluing tones (Ott, 2017). Without regulated social order in online spaces, especially with the user’s detachment of social norms, racist behaviours are amplified on social media platforms (Criss et al., 2020; Suler, 2004), leading to the attraction of similarly racist users to come together in ways they had not been able to before the internet.

SOCIAL ORGANISATIONS OF ONLINE RACISM

Organised racism refers to how racist hate groups actively discriminate a targeted group of people based on their racial or ethnic identity (Blee, 2002). The presence of racist groups on the internet in 1985, such as white supremacist groups and anti-Semitic groups, and ever increasing since then, began with racist actors in chat rooms and other online groups but has now spread to threads, social media, the creation of cloaked websites and other organised web presence such as Facebook groups (Glaser et al., 2002; Kessler, 1999). The US Anti-Defamation League released a report in 1985 to detail the presence of right-wing extremist groups in online spaces as they began utilising technology (Anti-Defamation League, 1985). Groups like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), Aryan hate groups, anti-Semitic groups, and the like are detailed as hate groups that began adapting technological tools (Anti-Defamation League, 1985).

Since then, hate groups have made their presence apparent online. One of the first extremist hate websites was Stormfront.org and was created in 1995 by Don Black, a prominent KKK leader (Daniels, 2009). Other leaders of hate groups, such as neo-Nazi groups, have utilised this new online frontier to set up their own webpages to both recruit and spread their group's ideologies (Phillips, 2016). Racist and white supremacist groups are now able to organise with others who are farther away geographically due to the reach that the internet has provided to its users – people no longer have to be in the same city, state or country (Gerstenfeld et al., 2003). The internet is commonly cited as a powerful tool used by racist groups to organise, recruit and share their content to a wide population of users who are either like-minded or susceptible to the information presented (Meddaugh and Kay, 2009).

As early as 1995, extremist websites were created to spread awareness for white supremacist ideologies, such as Stormfront.org (Daniels, 2009). These sites have the sole purpose of ardently pushing for white supremacist literature by linking other extremist sites and create a larger more interconnected web of cyberhate groups (Gerstenfeld et al., 2003). Often, websites operated by white supremacist groups are overt in their appearance and mission statement, which attracts other white supremacists who are open, if not proud, about their racial beliefs (Daniels, 2009; Scrivens and Amarasingam, 2020) – namely, the opinions on extremists' websites advocate for both racial violence and social competition between groups of differing races (Douglas et al., 2005).

Cloaked websites – i.e., web pages that have the appearance of a more mainstream and non-racist site yet have hidden political agendas or undertones of cyber racism – are one medium in which racist groups spread (mis)information in a concealed and indirect way to a susceptible audience (Daniels, 2009). Cloaked websites are not specific to white supremacist organisations, but most have elements of racial hate or other forms of discrimination based on sex or religion (Woolf and Hulsizer, 2004). Both cloaked websites and extremist group webpages attract their audiences with emotionally charged framing that feigns authenticity, while purporting messages ridden with racism and hate. For example, one website contained the stance that 'The White race is under threat of extinction in the United States' to mask white supremacist ideals under a legitimising tactic used as a falsified call to action (Douglas et al., 2005; McDonald, 1999). Affirming the interconnectedness of white supremacy organisations online, many extremist websites hyperlink other similar websites within their own webpages (Gerstenfeld et al., 2003). With the internet, creating a network of racist groups is as easy as hosting a link on a website that can lead to an external page, increasing the

reachability of racist content exponentially (Hargittai, 2004).

According to *The Hate Directory* (Franklin, 2010), hate groups are not only present in the United States context of post-slavery and civil rights strife, but also cross nationally in locations in South America, Europe, Canada and South Africa (Woolf and Hulsizer, 2004). Gerstenfeld et al. (2003) used a dataset of racial hate pages to describe the categories and origins of cyberhate activity, and the content analysis of 157 extremist websites contained 15 sites that were internationally based (e.g. white nationalist website and organisation from Britain). The researchers found that a majority of extremist sites appealed to other racist users with symbols (e.g., swastikas, crosses), cited other white supremacist works in the form of books or linking to other external websites, and framed their racist message in a covert manner (i.e., ‘claiming that the group was not racist or did not hate anyone’; Gerstenfeld et al., 2003: 35).

Social media sites also encourage the organisation of racist users into public or private groups. Facebook groups are a feature of the social media sites that extremist groups use to further their political agendas and recruit more users who subscribe to the far-right ideology (Anti-Defamation League, 2016; Klein and Muis, 2019). Much like the façade of a cloaked website, racism pervades in misleading Facebook groups – a method of using online functionality to instigate more racialised hate, called ‘platform antagonism’ – that incites violence and extreme ideologies from a disingenuous origin (Farkas et al., 2018). A survey study with Australian participants found most of their encounters of racist hate speech were on Facebook (about 40 per cent), followed by online comment threads and Youtube (Jakubowicz et al., 2017). Because Facebook recently developed a systematic yet computer-automated system of removing hate speech in violation of constitutional and online rights, how racism is organised in Facebook groups is now more concealed and less overtly abrasive than before (Siapera and

Viejo-Otero, 2021). Facebook racist groups utilise a variety of tactics to appeal to their audience, perhaps recruit others, and incite an emotional or angry reaction from its following; Canadian Facebook groups with racial hatred objectives attack their targeted outgroup (e.g., Islamic people) and share other multimedia content (e.g., videos with racist content) to further spread their message of racism to users who follow them (Scrivens and Amarasingam, 2020).

HOW ONLINE PLATFORMS SPUR RACIST ACTIONS

Lastly, the use of cyberspace to connect racist actors together by mutually subscribed white supremacist or racist ideologies ultimately leads to action in the real world, in the form of organised racist events, deeper subscription to the racist and white supremacist ideologies, and for more hatred towards the intended outgroup, among other racist outcomes (Bliuc et al., 2018; Scott and Street, 2000). Notably, some acts of sharing content online can be observed as real action, a form of online activism (van Zoonen et al., 2010). The internet is a tool to connect racist actors to each other, but the endgame is to organise in the physical world and push forward racist political agendas (Levin, 2002). Direct, causal links between online racist organisations and racist social movement events in the real world are sparse (McGarty et al., 2011). However, research examining the ways that racist content produced online have a high association with not only instigating real-world activism, but also the strength of the pro-racist activism, can provide insight into why racist ideals ultimately lead to racist action (Ekman 2018; Scott and Street 2000).

The Alt-Right Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA in 2017 culminated through connecting and planning via social media channels (Klein, 2019). The most

recent large-scale example of the visibility of hate and vitriol online, leading to a real-world event, is the 6 January 2021 Capitol Hill insurrection where Trump supporters, QAnon conspiracy believers, far-right extremists and other right-wing activists stormed the Capitol building in an act of defiance towards the 2020 election results, and, more fundamentally, racial tension (Sardarizadeh and Lussenhop, 2021). This is speculated to have been inspired by former President Trump's tweets days or perhaps months before the siege (Sherman, 2021). Previous far-right online activism also illustrates the efficacy of online mediums to incite activism efforts. In an analysis of right-wing extremist YouTube videos, Ekman (2014) concludes that racist groups use video mediums to push propaganda pointing to why their target racial groups present as threats to public order, but also more importantly threats to the domination and resources afforded to their audience demographics. After the Twin Towers attack on 9/11, anti-Muslim fringe groups used online media dissemination to spread racially charged emotional language, serving to widen their networks and recruit others to subscribe to Islamic hate sentiment and ideals (Bail, 2015). These examples of rhetoric serve to influence other racist users and viewers to strengthen their beliefs in the hateful messages, such as the content seen through clips (police arresting activists, politician soundbites or other highly emotional propaganda media) in order to elicit more right-wing radicalised responses (Ekman, 2014).

Because social movement mobilisation depends on opportunistic attention (Tarrow, 1994), such as publicity assisted by media, as well as recruitment and outreach through the internet, racist groups frequently utilise online social media as a dissemination tool. The stigma of racial hate given to these extremist groups ward off their potential to be picked up by national or mainstream news outlets, so in order to bypass media gatekeepers, racist organisations mobilise on public

platforms in covert ways (Ekman, 2018). In this way, white nationalist groups are able to proliferate more so than before the widespread reach of cyberspace; whereas racist groups were monitored by mainstream public opinion that racism has no place in society, the unregulated and anonymised mode of internet recruitment and activism presents a back door channel for racialised action to occur (Back, 2002).

Racist activism online is seen as a form of action, despite not happening in a face-to-face mode (Jakubowicz et al., 2017). Aims of in-person protests or any general collective action event is to spread awareness and recruit individuals into the ideologies and goal of the organisation; this can be achieved in online activism as well, as users can move towards hate speech and ignore efforts in antiracism awareness (Daniels, 2009; McGonagle, 2012). Simply observing the prevalence of hateful racial content online in the form of racist tweets on Twitter may provide us with insights into how hate crimes like the Woolwich attack against Muslims in the UK can happen through a slow build-up of anti-Muslim rhetoric online, leading to harmful offline action (Awan, 2014).

Social media's role in social movement success in mobilisation is well understood (Back et al., 1996; Cammaerts, 2012), and this extends to even pro-racist organising, although with different, more concealed aims than anti-racism activism (Glaser et al., 2002; Siapera and Viejo-Otero, 2021). Collective action undertaken by racist actors are now more widespread and frequent, due in part to the reachability and agency that online spaces have allowed (Levin, 2002). Actions online versus offline may denote two different forms of action, yet are one and the same when we talk about activism efforts in support of a societal cause – in this situation, the propagation of racist ideals and rhetoric.

In sum, racism proliferating on online platforms contribute to a rise of racist expression, beliefs, online groups of racists, racist webpages and resources that appear, and

the more general spread of cyberhate (Bliuc et al., 2018; Daniels, 2013; Jakubowicz, 2017). However, the direct linkages between online hate rhetoric to offline hate crimes are complex. Social movement literature best theorises how clusters of users who are linked by online racial hate speech leads to participation in racist activism (Harlow and Harp, 2010; McCaughey and Ayers, 2003), but a firm causal mechanism is difficult to conclude. Despite this, the empirical wealth of online content in monitoring how racist groups express their opinions, act on their beliefs and organise in their community can inform the final step of how racist ideals are able to turn into racist action.

HOW RACISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS INTERSECT

This review has focused on identifying major themes in extant scholarship on racism in the Digital Age. What is the general theory of digital racism implied by this body of work? We suggest that the emergent theory should focus on the escalation of racist voices, systemic pushback aiming to control racist content, and the ability of online platforms to operate as a safe space for such groups. First, this scholarship rejects the view that digital platforms either 'level the playing field' or in some sense neutralise the inequality between racial and ethnic minorities and the rest of society (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2017; Noble, 2018). To the contrary, most of the evidence reviewed here suggests that racism and racist groups have an amplified presence on social media platforms (Daniels, 2009). Anonymity encourages people to express racist sentiments (Glaser et al., 2002; Suler, 2014). Social media platforms amplify certain voices who already have influence and can skilfully generate emotional response, which often includes racially charged texts (Jansen and James, 2002).

Instead, social media platforms appear to extend the reach of those with racist beliefs and it allows racist organisations to create websites that reach thousands, perhaps millions of people (Daniels, 2013). Social media platforms have allowed groups that might have been obscure and disconnected from the rest of society in previous eras to have a disproportionate, more advantageous reach (Back, 2002). And again, social media disconnection of users' identities, leading to anonymity, encourages inflammatory posting. These observations lead to a basic description of digital racism. When viewed as a system of interconnected digital platforms, the internet becomes more racist with increasing levels of anonymity and lower levels of content control (Farkas et al., 2018).

At the same time, there are social and economic pressures from activists, politicians and the public to control such content. Service providers and social media firms experience pressure from users, investors, advertisers and even political actors to regulate their content for racist speech and misinformation (Rochefort, 2020). Even though debates about whether the content in question teeters between the line of opinions covered under free speech and outright false or violent content, social media companies are responsible for mitigating harm by enforcing community guidelines towards racist online behaviours. It is for this reason that social media firms have employees and algorithms that filter, or censor, content that violates their rules. Reddit was one such firm, which increased its regulation of content (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017). Later, Twitter began enforcing bans against users that management believed was breaking its rules (Savov, 2021). Even platforms that emphasise a commitment to unregulated content, like 4chan, have, on occasion, needed to expel or ban boards and topics (4chan, 2021). This suggests a second principle: the internet will have different fora, or zones, that vary in their ability to regulate racist speech or actions. Due to social

pressures, digital providers will enact rules and regulations to discourage these activities.

An important caveat to include here is the cross-national context of racism's proliferation online, and what historical conditions have allowed this distinct brand of racism to develop. For example, the United States' race relations are largely defined by the historical atrocities of slavery that still carry repercussions to this day (Du Bois, 1948), and the UK's own histories of war and Eurocentric ideals adds a different context to the racialised society overseas (Thomas, 2004). The breadth of country-specific race relations is wide and nuanced. This chapter reviews generalities about racism online functioning differently in cross-national contexts, but when narrowed down to a specific location, online racism can take on different scope conditions and unique results.

A third idea that emerges from this review is the notion that digital platforms can act as launching pads, or incubators, of racist groups, just as they do for any other social movement (Cammaerts, 2012). It is worth asking how offline political actions are made possible, or facilitated, by the types of digital spaces discussed in this chapter. There has been some evidence that this does occur. Recently, a mob of Trump followers stormed the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 and many of the rioters were long-time participants in various online white supremacist or racist communities like QAnon (Sardarizadeh and Lussenhop, 2021). Similarly, participants in the 2017 Charlottesville rallies were often mobilised through online 'alt.right' websites (Klein, 2019). It remains to be seen if this process reflects an idiosyncratic fringe element of American politics, or if this is the beginning of a larger trend where openly racist politicians start their careers in online fora before moving to street protest or electoral contests.

Normatively, one might ask what policies are suggested by this research. It helps to appreciate the limits of direct intervention. As a vast decentralised ecosystem of domains, it would likely be impossible for any single

entity, government agency or private firm to completely eliminate organised racism or racism expressions online. As Edwards et al. (2021) conclude, social media content policing rests on the onus of both the individual's self-regulation and the online regulatory bodies, such as content oversight managers and the social media platforms themselves. Automated social media regulation of hate speech is a difficult task due to the imperfect nature of machine learning algorithms to clearly dictate what is racist speech and what is an exercise of freedom of speech (Edwards et al., 2021). Still, we are seeing signs that some strategies appear to mitigate or control the worst actions (Fagnoni, 2019). 4chan has, in some cases, banned problematic users, who have had to migrate to more obscure sites like 8chan (Greenemeier, 2018). At the larger sites, like Twitter and Facebook, there are more comprehensive efforts to filter content and ban users (Siapera and Viejo-Otero, 2021). Some scholars have argued that the algorithms that match people on social media platforms or produce searches are biased because of the programming behind them or the data that users provide (Sandvig et al. 2016). The racial biases that emerge from such technologies are not stable nor are they immutable. They can be analysed, changed and potentially altered. Thus, in the future, it may be possible to 'correct' or adjust the way that algorithms do their work.

CONCLUSION

As digital technologies evolve, so will racism. Future research can explore how racist groups adapt themselves to the ever-changing digital environment. One question that can be asked concerns the location of racist sentiment and racist groupings. When new technologies emerge and established platforms institute rules limiting content, do racists groups 'leave town' and plant themselves in less regulated environments? Or is it possible that

racist groups 'dig deep' and use existing technologies in novel ways to sustain their mobilisation within older platforms?

Another question relates to the effect of social media usage and personal well-being. Several studies have presented evidence that excessive use of social media may be detrimental, especially if the person is exposed to cyberbullying (Farrington and Ttofi, 2009; Kowalski et al., 2012). How does the well-being of social media users change when they participate in spaces that have less racist content? As social media platforms institute more content regulations, one might hypothesise that users will be less exposed to stress and therefore have better mental health.

Finally, one might ask how society, collectively, deals with online racism? The internet is a vast resource that is incredibly valuable. The proliferation of racist content and sites is something that diminishes the internet's economic and social value (Ostrom, 2015). How can researchers measure the collective effort to recast the internet as a more hospitable environment? How successful will these efforts be? By answering these questions, sociologists can contribute to the ongoing discussion about the complex relationship between racial inequality and digital technologies.

Note

- 1 The term 'real world' is used interchangeable with 'offline', 'physical world', and 'face-to-face'. Real-world racism and online racism are not separate phenomena; rather, they are interlinked and only differentiated by the platform of diffusion. Although online, digital racism is still harmful in this medium and has offline consequences.

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