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# Staking Territory in the “World White Web”: An Exploration of the Roles of Overt and Color-Blind Racism in Maintaining Racial Boundaries on a Popular Web Site

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## Abstract

Early scholarship on the Web suggested that, in an online world, physical markers of marginalization would be invisible and race would become obsolete. Instead, recent research indicates that the Web is a white space that grants easier access and greater power to white users than users of color. In fact, studies indicate that both overt and color-blind racism are circulated online. Still, optimistic scholars maintain hope that the Web can provide a space for meaningful discourse around race and, hence, promote the deconstruction of racism. In this study, we analyze 2,000 comments posted to YouTube forums to examine patterns of overt racism, color-blind racism, and dissent against racism. Logistic regression reveals that comments posted by users identifying as persons of color have greater odds of eliciting overt racist responses than comments posted by users not specifying a racial identity. In addition, users exhibit greater odds of dissenting against overt than color-blind racism—with qualitative themes suggesting some users mistake color-blind racism for dissent. Thus, we argue that both overt and color-blind racism play roles in maintaining white spaces online, with the former maintaining racial boundaries and the latter convoluting conversations about race and impeding the dismantling of racism.

## Keywords

racial and ethnic minorities; race, gender, and class; media, Internet

Early maps of the World Wide Web charted a utopian society where, by simply logging on and crossing the boundary from the off-line to the online world, disembodied citizens could leave behind physical markers of marginalization, such as race (Levy 2001; Poster 2001; Rheingold 2000; Turkle 1995). This world has yet to be realized, as research indicates that online and off-line worlds are intertwined and, thus, race is significant online (Brock 2009a; Hughey 2008; Kendall 1998, 2000, 2002;

Nakamura 2002, 2008; Wong 2000). In fact, when users log on to the online world, they bring along with them the values they have

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obtained from their socialization in a racially stratified off-line world (Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman 2000). Mirroring the racial power disparity that favors whites off-line, a growing body of scholarship suggests that the Web constitutes a white space that grants white users easier admission and greater power than what it grants to users of color (Brock 2006; DiMaggio et al. 2004; Hargittai 2010; Hoffman and Novak 1998). As Nakamura and Chow-White (2012) stated, "It was once thought that we would all be the same, anonymous users with infinite powers. Instead . . . the Internet and other computer-based technologies are complex topographies of power and privilege" (p. 17).

Evidence that the Web constitutes a white space is often exemplified through analyses of racist propaganda that white supremacists promulgate online (see, for example, Adams and Roscigno 2005; Anahita 2006; Atton 2006; Back 2002; Daniels 2009; Duffy 2003; Gerstenfeld, Grant, and Chiang 2003; Glaser, Dixit, and Green 2002). Although the content of these sites poses a threat of recruiting, uniting, and mobilizing white supremacists (Adams and Roscigno 2005; Back 2002; Gerstenfeld et al. 2003), it is likely to be dismissed as extremist by most Americans, who generally see themselves as "colorblind" (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Feagin 2010; Gallagher 2003b). That is, the overt Jim Crow racism that historically prevailed in maintaining racial inequality has been superseded by a more contemporary form of racism—one that operates under the assumption that color is no longer a structuring force in American society and "explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics" (Bonilla-Silva 2006:2).

Based on the virulent nature of color-blind racism, scholars of race and the Internet urge researchers to move beyond analyses of egregious racism on extremist Web sites and begin to focus on (1) more subtle forms of racism and (2) racism found on general sites (i.e., those that do not explicitly focus on race; Brock 2012; Daniels 2013; Hughey and Daniels 2013). Presently, very few studies focus on racist rhetoric promulgated through general Web sites (for such investigations, see,

for example, Hughey 2012b; Hughey and Daniels 2013; Steinfeldt et al. 2010). These existing studies focus on comments posted to news Web sites and document the online presence of both overt and color-blind racism.

Given the predominance of color-blind ideology throughout American culture, the existence of color-blind racism on the Web is not particularly surprising. However, the online presence of overt racism is especially noteworthy because such rhetoric is considered taboo in the (color-blind) off-line world and, when expressed, is typically limited to private "backstage" settings with white-only audiences (Myers 2005; Picca and Feagin 2007). Although surprising, these online displays of overt racism can be explained by the fact that the Web offers users a sense of privacy and anonymity that, whether actual or simply perceived, allows them to express themselves in ways that they would not normally do so publicly (Bargh and McKenna 2004; Evans et al. 2003; H. Kennedy 2006). Furthermore, the blurring of boundaries between private and public allows overt racism (taboo and typically expressed privately) and color-blind racism (socially acceptable and typically expressed publicly) to coexist on the Web (Hughey 2012b; Hughey and Daniels 2013).

Although the Web can be conceptualized as a white space, some scholars express hope that, by merging the public world with private worlds, as well as worlds occupied by whites with those occupied by people of color, the Web can foster meaningful interracial conversations about race that do not typically happen in the off-line world (Brock 2009b; Brock, Kvansy, and Hales 2010; Hughey and Daniels 2013). Brock (2009b) posited that this has the potential to create a neutral space where racially diverse users can create meaningful discourse around race and, perhaps, work to dismantle racism. This is important because, in the off-line world, dissent against racism is relatively rare (Picca and Feagin 2007).

In this investigation, we analyze comments posted on YouTube forums to examine patterns of overt racism, color-blind racism, and dissent against racism. We explore the possibility that racism can be used as an instrumental tool to

proclaim online forums as white spaces, especially when users believe a space to be threatened by the presence of users of color. In addition, we examine the manner in which online forums can serve as spaces where racism can be deconstructed, while emphasizing the role that color-blind racism plays in threatening this process. Our analysis suggests that both overt and color-blind racism have the potential to play roles in designating white spaces on the Web, with the former maintaining the boundaries of what is arguably the *World White Web* and the latter convoluting conversations about race in a manner that impedes the dismantling of racism.

## The World Wide Web and Race

The World Wide Web is undergoing a vast population boom. According to Pew Research Center data, 78 percent of all Americans over the age of 18 were using the Internet in 2011, a dramatic increase from the 47 percent who were online in 2000 (Zickuhr and Smith 2012). Thus, it is not surprising that social scientists are paying attention to the manner in which the Internet is changing social interactions (Bargh and McKenna 2004; DiMaggio et al. 2001; Howard, Rainie, and Jones 2001; Kraut et al. 2002; Turkle 1995; Wang and Wellman 2010).

A fair amount of early scholarship on the social implications of the Internet implied that race would become an antiquated concept in an online world. This logic extends from the idea that the sense of anonymity offered by the Internet makes identity a fluid entity, allowing users to eschew classifications that serve as sources of marginalization (e.g., race; Levy 2001; McKenna and Bargh 2000; Poster 2001; Rheingold 2000; Turkle 1995). Contradicting these hopes for racial obsolescence, research indicates that race is highly relevant on the Internet, where it is actively constructed and performed, as well as evaluated by other users (see Brock 2009a; Byrne 2008; Hughey 2008; Kendall 1998, 2000, 2002; Nakamura 2002, 2008; Wong 2000). Furthermore, the anonymity of the Web is not likely to liberate users from marginalizing racial classifications, as

research indicates users typically perform online identities in a manner that mirrors their off-line identities (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons 2002; Baym 2006; Kendall 2002). As Kolko et al. (2000) explained,

Race matters in cyberspace precisely because all of us who spend time online are already shaped by the ways in which race matters offline, and we can't help but bring our own knowledge, experiences, and values with us when we log on. (Pp. 4–5)

Although the continued significance of race online has the potential to serve as a source of marginalization for users, this is not necessarily the case. In fact, scholars have conceptualized the Internet as both a white space characterized by white privilege and a space where white users and users of color can come together to create meaningful discourse about race and, ultimately, dismantle racism.

## The Web as a White Space

The Web arguably constitutes a white space both in terms of who has access to it and who has power and privilege within it (see Dinerstein 2006 for an overview of technology and white power/privilege). Race is a major basis for the “digital divide,” in that people of color tend to have more limited access to the Internet than whites do (DiMaggio et al. 2004; Hoffman and Novak 1998). Thus, it should not be surprising that being white, as compared to black or Hispanic, is a significant predictor of one's self-reported skill navigating the Internet (Hargittai 2010).

However, it is important to note that measures of the digital divide have been criticized for relying on a discourse of “deficiency” that unduly casts people of color as technologically illiterate, or technological outsiders, while ignoring structural and cultural contributions to unequal use of the Internet (Brock 2006; Everett 2002, 2009; Kvasny 2006; Nakamura 2008). In fact, the digital divide can be more complicated than what is indicated by a simple measure of who does and does not have access to the Internet; rather, it can be conceptualized as a measure of who does and does not have

access to meaningful usage of the Internet (Selwyn 2004). For people of color, meaningful Web usage is unlikely, as content is largely designed with white users' interests in mind (Brock 2006).

To illustrate, there is some evidence that users of color, particularly those with strong racial/ethnic identities, experience more meaningful Web usage when browsing Web sites that target their racial group than they do browsing mainstream (i.e., white-targeted) Web sites (Appiah 2003, 2004). However, the value that these racially targeted sites can have for users of color seems to escape many white users. This is perhaps best exemplified by white bloggers' reactions to the release of the Blackbird Web browser (see Brock 2011). Marketed as a tool to search for elusive Web content meeting the interests of black Internet users, this browser was met with much critical reception by both black and white bloggers. Black bloggers were typically critical of Blackbird's practical utility, whereas white bloggers alleged that the browser was inherently racist. Brock argues that such an allegation is a product of the invisibility of whiteness in a color-blind culture.

As the privileged group in society, whites have the ability to see themselves as absent of race. That is, whites are normalized and seen as generic, while people of color are racialized (Frankenberg 1993; Hughey 2011b). As a result, whites rarely see themselves as having racial identities and typically fail to notice the effects that racial privilege has on their lives (Gallagher 2003a; Lewis 2004). Accordingly, white spaces are typically believed to be absent of race and, hence, the presence of people of color is believed to introduce race into a setting. Applied to Brock's (2011) analysis, color-blind bloggers who believed the mainstream Web to be absent of race interpreted the release of a browser targeting black users as an unnecessary and preferential service.

As a general consequence of the invisibility of whiteness, the Web is perceived as a nonracial space where the prototypical Web user is blindly assumed to be white (Kendall 1998, 2000; Kolko 2000; Nakamura 2002). Thus, self-identifying as a person of color is

considered a very significant act (Kendall 2000, 2002; Kolko 2000). It constitutes the racialization of the Web and, most importantly, an affront to a white space. To illustrate, investigations by Watkins (2009) and boyd (2011) find evidence of a "digital white flight" in which many young white users left MySpace for Facebook during the first decade of the 2000s based on their perception that MySpace was becoming a "digital ghetto" populated by people of color. That is, white users fled a particular social network site when they believed its standing as a white space was threatened.

If the clear presence of users of color is truly an affront to a white space, then we might expect to see some users engage in boundary work to maintain that space. That is, whereas Watkins (2009) and boyd (2011) demonstrated that white users fled a particular social network site when its standing as a white space was threatened, we suggest that users can also take offensive action, such as employing racist rhetoric, to maintain a white space online. Specifically, we posit that users will deploy overt, as opposed to color-blind, racism to maintain racial boundaries. This is because color-blind racism is ostensibly not about race and, thus, is not typically identified as racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Overt racism, on the contrary, is especially well suited as a tool to claim power and intimidate persons of color (Hom 2008; Kinder and Sears 1981; Kleinpenning and Hagendoorn 1993; Ture and Hamilton [1967] 1992). Therefore, we believe that, when using racism in an instrumental manner, users will rely on the overt racist rhetoric that they know to be offensive. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 1:** Comments in which a user self-identifies as a person of color will have greater odds of eliciting overt racism from other users than comments that do not contain a racial identification.

**Hypothesis 2:** Comments in which a user self-identifies as a person of color will have equal odds of eliciting color-blind racism from other users as comments that do not contain a racial identification.

## *Dismantling Racism in a White Space*

Despite research that suggests the Web privileges white users, some scholars argue that the Web can be fruitful in generating constructive discourse around race. In contrast to early work that predicted an online racial utopia, these scholars recognize that race is visible and significant on the Web and, as such, believe that the Web can bring discussions about race from the private to the public and from racially exclusive populations to a racially diverse population (Brock 2009b; Brock et al. 2010; Hughey and Daniels 2013). Brock and colleagues specifically argue that the Web offers a platform where informal conversations that were once relegated to racially segregated spaces, such as black-owned barbershops and beauty salons, can reach a racially diverse audience (Brock 2009b; Brock et al. 2010). Conveying cautious optimism that the Web can provide a space for the deconstruction of racism, Brock (2009b) stated that it has the capacity to “create understandings of differences between people” necessary for “disarming the symbolic violence demonstrated by those holding to a color-blind ideology” (p. 34).

Importantly, disarming symbolic violence (e.g., racism) requires that users dissent when they encounter it. In fact, dissent can be powerful, as classic experimental studies of group processes have found that even minimal dissent within a group can weaken the majority consensus (see Allen 1966; Allen and Levine 1971; Asch 1956; Nemeth and Chiles 1988). For instance, in a study by Nemeth and Chiles (1988), the presence of one actor expressing views different from the majority, whether these views were correct or not, substantially reduced the level of group conformity.

However, as Brock (2009b) suggested when he implicated those users “holding to a color-blind ideology,” we posit that color-blind racism threatens the potential for the Web to serve as a space where racism can be dismantled. We suspect this to be the case on two grounds. First, individuals who subscribe to color-blind ideology are unlikely to take racism (i.e., overt or color-blind) seriously and, thus, are unlikely

to dissent against it (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Tynes and Markoe 2010). As Daniels and Lalone (2012) noted, the color-blind ideology that pervades white culture ultimately “dismisses concerns about racism as irrelevant” such that “remarking upon race is seen as more problematic than the harm of racism” (p. 95).

Second, and more specific to the focus of this investigation, the elusive nature of color-blind racism means that this specific rhetoric is unlikely to be noticed and, thus, unlikely to be challenged. Although color-blind ideology impedes dissent against racism in general, it is perhaps most damaging in its ability to render itself invisible. As Bonilla-Silva (2006) argued, the power of color-blind racism lies in its ability to remain undetected. In fact, color-blind racism cloaks itself so well that it is circulated in the rhetoric of both white supremacists and members of white antiracist organizations (Hughey 2011a, 2012a). Specifically, in his ethnographic studies of these two groups, Hughey finds that, although they promote opposing agendas, both of these groups invoke rhetoric that casts whiteness as the superior race (i.e., white antiracist organization members evoke such rhetoric in a paternalistic manner suggesting that whites must save people of color).

Thus, it should not be surprising that dissent against color-blind racism is rare (Bonilla-Silva 2006). That is, while dissent against overt racism is relatively uncommon (Kawakami et al. 2009; Picca and Feagin 2007; Trepagnier 2006), the invisibility of color-blind racism should ensure that it remains virtually unchallenged. In fact, Hughey and Daniels (2013) noted that, on moderated news sites, comments containing color-blind racism often escape censorship and remain posted. As the authors argue, this is problematic because it allows users to encounter color-blind ideology on Web sites that are mistakenly understood to be absent of racism, thus, implying that such rhetoric is not racist. The authors contend that researchers who are interested in race and the Internet need to recognize subtle forms of racism. Heeding this advice, we explore the manner in which color-blind racism impedes the ability of the Web to serve as

a space where racism is dismantled. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 3:** Users' comments containing overt racism will have greater odds of eliciting dissent from other users than comments containing color-blind racism.

## Data and Method

To test these hypotheses, we examined comments posted on YouTube.com. Ranked number three in online traffic worldwide, YouTube is an extremely popular general interest Web site, surpassed only by Google and Facebook, respectively (Alexa 2011). This makes YouTube the most popular Web site that is socially interactive, text-based, and anonymous. These latter two points are important, as users' race is not obvious to others.

Launched in 2005, YouTube allows users to upload, share, view, and comment on videos of various content (e.g., amateur videos, broadcasted programs, movies, etc.). Users can post comments pertinent to specific videos and create threads in which they respond to original posts. This is useful because the format of YouTube allows us to assess racist comments as well as support for and dissent against such remarks. Importantly, YouTube is not a monitored site and, thus, is likely to contain both overt and color-blind racism (Hughey and Daniels 2013).<sup>1</sup>

### Sampling

To sufficiently assess our hypotheses, it was imperative that our sample captured comments posted to videos that provided large, active forums for racial discourse. Given the wide range of YouTube videos, both in popularity and content, we found random sampling to be incompatible with this goal. Moreover, random sampling posed logistical challenges, as the constant upload of videos and posting of comments to this high-traffic Web site created an ever-changing sampling frame. Thus, we used purposive sampling by limiting our sample to comments posted to videos that both (1) reached a large audience and (2) were pertinent

to race. These sampling criteria created a relatively static sampling frame and produced a sample of comments that provided sufficient data for meaningful analysis of racial discourse between users.

To obtain the sample for our study, we searched YouTube for the five most frequently viewed videos classified under each of the following search terms: "racism," "racist," "white race," "black race," and "Hispanic race." This particular combination of search terms offered a balance of phrases that convey both a negative connotation (i.e., racism and racist) and a neutral connotation (i.e., the term "race" paired with qualifiers representing various groups).<sup>2</sup> As whites, blacks, and Hispanics represent the three largest racial groups in the United States, we limited our search to videos pertinent to those groups. This process yielded a sample of 20 videos.<sup>3</sup> From this sample we gathered the 100 most recent comments for each video, organized by threads (i.e., conversations). We chose to gather contiguous comments to capture the contextual flow of conversations and permit meaningful analysis of discursive dynamics between users.

To limit the influence of time (e.g., current events), we collected all sampled comments concurrently. We excluded those comments that appeared in a language other than English or Spanish as well as those that were removed by YouTube. In the case of excluded comments, we moved on to the next subsequent comment until we reached a total of 100 for each video.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the final sample included 2,000 comments.

### Operationalization of Racial Content

To capture racial content, we coded for overt and color-blind racism, dissent, and antiwhite prejudice (none of which were mutually exclusive)—as well as whether each comment elicited a response containing overt racism, color-blind racism, and/or dissent. We also indicated whether users specified a racial identity. We represented all racial content variables in dummy form, assigning a value of "1" if the comment's content fit our measures and "0" if it did not.

It is important to note that the racist content of comments in our sample could be a product of trolling, or “the sending of a message . . . specifically intended to cause irritation to others” (Crystal 2001:52). When encountering trolling, users often label it as such (Donath 1999). However, in our sample, only two (.10 percent) comments elicited allegations of trolling from other users. Thus, we believe that users in our study did not believe trolling to be a significant problem. However, even if trolling were prevalent, it would not necessarily pose a problem for our analysis because we are more concerned with measuring users’ reactions to other users’ comments than with the sincerity of those initial comments.

**Overt racism.** To define overt racism, we used three frames. First, informed by Kleinpenning and Hagendoorn’s (1993) conceptualization of *biological racism*, we indicated whether comments included (1) pro-segregationist arguments pertaining to housing, work, marriage, childbearing, or general social life; (2) claims that people of color are less intelligent than whites; (3) claims that people of color do not have a right to be in the country (or any other location); or (4) claims that whites behave better than people of color—or, alternatively, that people of color behave worse than whites.

In addition, our definition of overt racism included the use of *threats* and *epithets*. Threats included statements of intent to cause death, injury, or violent destruction of property against people of color. We defined racial epithets as “derogatory expressions, understood to convey contempt and hatred toward their targets” (Hom 2008:416). Our conceptualization necessitated that epithets be directed toward people of color; we did not include slurs against whites in this category (see our conceptualization of antiwhite prejudice below). Examples include “the n-word” as well as outdated racial terms such as colored, negroid, negro, and so on. In recognition of the controversy that surrounds divergent meanings of “the n-word” (see R. Kennedy 2002), we excluded from our definition any usage of this epithet that met one of the following criteria: (1) the user employed the term to identify

himself or herself or his or her constituents or (2) the user used the term in a quote, or otherwise attributed it to a third party. Thus, our measurement of epithets is conservative and errs on the side of underestimating their prevalence in our sample.

**Color-blind racism.** In our definition of color-blind racism, we relied on Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) following frames: *abstract liberalism*, *naturalization*, *cultural racism*, and *minimization*. We defined abstract liberalism as comments that use individualistic arguments (e.g., equal opportunity, individual choice, individual responsibility) to explain racial matters/issues. We coded comments as conveying the naturalization frame if they explained away racial phenomenon by suggesting they are natural occurrences (e.g., justifying segregation by arguing that people of color prefer to be with people like themselves). Our definition of cultural racism included comments that argued that racial matters are due to the inferior culture/values of people of color. Finally, we coded comments as exhibiting the minimization frame if they argued that racism is no longer a problem and/or race does not matter; rather, people of color are hypersensitive and use race as an excuse to explain their own inadequacies.

**Dissent.** To capture *dissent*, we coded comments for the presence of rhetoric that challenged the above definitions of overt or color-blind racism, promoted racial equality/tolerance, or acknowledged the existence of white privilege. This included general dissent against racism as well as dissent against (or disagreement with) specific users’ racist comments, such as in a thread.

**Antiwhite prejudice.** We take a stance consistent with prominent race scholars (e.g., Feagin, Vera, and Batur 2001; Ture and Hamilton [1967] 1992) and argue that only people of color can be the victims of racism. Although people of color can make comments that are disparaging against whites, they lack the societal power to use such rhetoric as a tool of oppression. Nonetheless, to account for the



influence of derogatory comments about whites on the content of other users' comments, we coded for *antiwhite prejudice*. Our definition of this variable included comments that were disparaging or demeaning to the white race, including threats and epithets.

**Racial ID.** To explore relationships between users' racial identification and the racial content of comments, we included a Racial ID variable. Coding consisted of indicating whether users identified themselves as white (0 = No, 1 = Yes) or a person of color (0 = No, 1 = Yes), with users who failed to identify their race being the reference group in our statistical analyses. We defined Racial ID as users' identification of themselves as belonging to a particular race either through the content of their comments (e.g., explicitly or through the use of an affiliative term, such as "we") or through their user names (e.g., "whiteboy123"). We do not assume that this measure captured users' true racial identifications; rather, more importantly, we believe it captured users' representations of themselves to other users.

### **Operationalization of Control Variables**

Our analyses controlled for video content and video visibility/popularity. Specifically, we used our previously described definitions of overt and color-blind racism to indicate whether the video included racist content (0 = No, 1 = Yes). In addition, we included a variable to represent the genre of the video (0 = News and Politics, 1 = Entertainment). Finally, to capture the visibility of each video, we accounted for the total number of views and total number of comments for each video.<sup>5</sup>

### **Coding Reliability**

For coding purposes, we organized definitions for each of the previously described variables into a codebook. We, the two authors, coded the control variables (i.e., video content and genre variables) collaboratively after viewing the videos. We resolved disagreements through discussion. We then coded the comment

variables independently (i.e., Overt Racism, Color-Blind Racism, Dissent, Antiwhite Prejudice, Overt Racist Response, Color-Blind Racist Response, Dissent Response, and Racial ID variables). First, we practiced independently coding two sets of comments that do not appear in our final sample and discussed disagreements, refining the codebook throughout the process. Then, we each independently coded comments for half of the videos in our final sample (i.e., 1,000 comments each). Finally, to assess reliability, we each coded a random sample of 10 percent ( $n = 100$ ) of the comments from the other author's subsample. Dividing the number of agreements by the total opportunities for agreement yielded interrater reliability of at least 95 percent for each variable.

## **Results and Discussion**

Descriptive statistics for the sample are summarized in Table 1. Racism appeared in 10.70 percent ( $n = 214$ ) of user comments.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, 6.40 percent ( $n = 128$ ) of all comments in the sample contained overt racism and 5.50 percent ( $n = 109$ ) of all comments contained color-blind racism. Users generally circulated these forms of racism independently of one another, as only 10.75 percent ( $n = 23$ ) of all comments containing racism included both overt and color-blind forms. Importantly, dissent against racism appeared in 7.95 percent ( $n = 159$ ) of all posts. Thus, dissent was more prevalent than both overt and color-blind racism individually but less prevalent than racism as a whole (see Table 1).

### **Hypotheses 1 and 2**

Although the vast majority of users in our sample cloaked their race, some users actively chose to claim a racial identity. As summarized in Table 1, 4.10 percent ( $n = 81$ ) of users identified as persons of color and 2.70 percent ( $n = 53$ ) of users identified as white. Logistic regression analysis indicated that comments in which a user identified as a person of color, compared with those with no racial identification, were significantly more likely to elicit overt racist

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Variables Representing Racial Content of Comments to YouTube Videos ( $N = 2,000$ ).

	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
<b>Video variables</b>				
Number of views	9,039,416	7,805.498	338,850	29,126,570
Number of comments	25,232	25,507.25	831	83,420
<b>Genre</b>				
News/politics (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.200	.400	0	1
Entertainment (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.800	.400	0	1
Racist content (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.200	.400	0	1
<b>Comment variables</b>				
<b>Racial ID</b>				
No racial ID (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.933	.250	0	1
White ID (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.027	.161	0	1
Person of color ID (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.041	.197	0	1
<b>Racism (0 = No, 1 = Yes)</b>				
Overt racism (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.107	.309	0	1
Biological racism (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.064	.245	0	1
Epithet (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.039	.194	0	1
Threat (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.035	.183	0	1
Color-blind racism (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.012	.109	0	1
Abstract liberalism (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.055	.227	0	1
Minimization (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.021	.142	0	1
Cultural (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.034	.180	0	1
Naturalization (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.008	.086	0	1
Dissent (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.002	.045	0	1
Antiwhite prejudice (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.080	.271	0	1
<b>Comment response variables</b>				
Overt racist response (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.019	.135	0	1
Color-blind racist response (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.025	.155	0	1
Dissent response (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.019	.137	0	1
Dissent response (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.027	.162	0	1

Note. Numeric means or proportions are shown.

responses (see Table 2). Specifically, as summarized in Model 1, the odds of a comment eliciting an overt racist response were approximately five times higher when the user identified as a person of color than when the user did not claim a racial identity. Most importantly, this effect was observed when we controlled for the content of the user's comment (i.e., overt racism, color-blind racism, dissent against racism, and antiwhite prejudice) as well as whether the user identified as white. In contrast, results reported in Model 2 indicate that identifying as a person of color was not a significant predictor of color-blind racist responses (net of control variables). Thus, both Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported.

Overall, these findings suggest that some users in our sample assumed they were in conversation with white users until proven otherwise. That is, they assumed white identities, white privilege, and white space to be the default. As a result, those who were threatened by the identification of a user of color used overt racism as a tool to reclaim a forum as a white space. As hypothesized, users did not use color-blind racism as a tool to maintain white privilege. We suspect this is because color-blind racism is subtle and, thus, users did see its utility in conveying that particular users were not welcome.

Interestingly, some users in our sample took an especially antagonistic approach to

**Table 2.** Logistic Regression Coefficients Predicting Responses to User Comments (N = 2,000).

	Model 1:		Model 2:		Model 3:	
	Overt racist response		Color-blind racist response		Dissent response	
	Logged odds	Odds ratio	Logged odds	Odds ratio	Logged odds	Odds ratio
Intercept	-4.599*** (.437)	0.010***	-4.379*** (.411)	0.013***	-4.675*** (.392)	0.009***
Racist content (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	0.589 (.368)	1.802	0.995** (.353)	2.705**	0.782* (.313)	2.186*
Entertainment (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	0.473 (.418)	1.605	-1.027* (.421)	0.358*	0.119 (.368)	1.126
White ID (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	0.372 (.793)	1.451	1.169† (.690)	3.219†	0.617 (.505)	1.853
Person of color ID (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	1.601*** (.371)	4.958***	0.175 (.585)	1.192	-0.153 (.596)	0.858
Overt racism (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	0.410 (.563)	1.507	-0.468 (.812)	0.626	2.316*** (.351)	10.135***
Color-blind racism (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	0.589 (.607)	1.802	1.417** (.508)	4.125**	1.645*** (.367)	5.181***
Dissent (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	2.183*** (.347)	8.873***	2.597*** (.375)	13.423***	1.341** (.411)	3.823**
Antiwhite prejudice (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	2.011*** (.513)	7.471***	0.560 (.737)	1.750	1.314† (.677)	3.721†
-2 log likelihood	317.732		294.954		386.640	
$\chi^2$	142.548***		81.532***		109.976***	

Note. Standard errors reported in parentheses. Models control for number of views and number of comments.  
 †p < .10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001 (two-tailed tests).

claiming forums as white spaces by engaging in what we call “race baiting.” Rather than using racism in exchanges with users who have identified as persons of color, race baiting involves using racism in an attempt to elicit a racial identification from users suspected to be people of color. For example, one protagonist, who identifies as white in his or her user name, suspects that he or she is in dialogue with a person of color and attempts to lure that user into identifying his or her race, by taunting:

**Protagonist:** Boy, which one are you the negro or the latrino (yes, latrino not latino). You talk big online, probably sitting in the projects using welfare check to pay for internet time. WHITE PRIDE WORLD WIDE.

The power dynamics in this statement are interesting. By declaring “white pride world wide,” this user attempts to establish the space

in which he or she is speaking as white while demanding that his or her interlocutor (who does not respond) identify as a clearly unwelcome outsider.

It is important to note that not all users were vested in maintaining the boundaries of a white space. In fact, some users seemed to be aware of, and actually critique, the racial power dynamics of the forum where they were communicating. For example, the following user, who does not identify his or her race, insinuates with censure, that he or she is communicating in a white space by criticizing:

**Dissenter:** man look at this bullshit any time theres a racist issue on youtube all the white people thumb up [express agreement with] the other white people . . .

However, even users who were critical of racial power disparities sometimes implicitly claimed forums as white spaces, as illustrated by the following exchange:

- Protagonist:** Black people bitch to much about racism, get over it nignugs everyone is racist.
- Dissenter:** Clown (May I call you that?) Not everyone is ignorant and uneducated like YOU are. Racism is UNACCEPTABLE for blacks, other people of color, and whites. You want people of color to “accept” poor treatment. NOPE. You are another “brave” internet clown talking big *but never in front of a black* [emphasis added]. How do you spell your name? COWARD. Now get over your stupidity (Easier said than done.)

By calling the protagonist a “brave Internet clown,” this dissenter denounces the Web as a space where users circulate racist rhetoric in a manner that would be less acceptable in face-to-face interactions. At the same time, by claiming racism is circulated “never in front of a black,” he or she reinforces the notion that the Web is a white space by assuming that users are white by default.

### Hypothesis 3

As evident in the previous exchanges, the comments in our sample suggest that online spaces can be used for the deconstruction of racism. That is, in our online sample, dissenting dialogue about racism, which is uncommon in off-line interactions, did occur. However, as we expected, users in our sample did not dissent against all forms of racism equally.

As summarized in Model 3 (see Table 2), the odds of comments that contained overt racism eliciting dissent were 10 times higher than the odds of comments that did *not* contain overt racism eliciting dissent. In comparison, the odds of comments that contained color-blind racism eliciting dissent were only 5 times as high as the odds of comments that did *not* contain color-blind racism eliciting dissent. To

compare the magnitude of these effects, we computed standardized (logit) coefficients for overt racism (3.498) and color-blind racism (2.304), which indicate that overt racism was more likely to elicit dissent than color-blind racism. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

These results suggest that, consistent with Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) theory, users in our sample either did not recognize color-blind racism as racist or did not find it offensive. Illustrating this dynamic, the following exchange involves a protagonist who makes both overt and color-blind racist remarks and a dissenter who challenges the former but not the latter:

- Protagonist:** I want to kindly discourage white people from ever using the n-word. The n-word (n\*gger) helps blacks frame themselves as victims. I do not hate blacks, but whites are the main victims of forced integration/multiculturalism. Blacks are relatively unattractive: Oily, wooly hair. Swollen lips. Ultra wide noses. Very high crime rate. And cross-cultural studies confirm that blacks, on average, have significantly lower IQ’s. I’m not making fun of them.
- Dissenter:** People like you is why hate crimes are present. White people are NOT the superior race and never will be... [ellipses in original] And black people are not unattractive. There are good looking and ugly people in EVERY race.

In this example, a protagonist uses both overt racism (i.e., claiming that black people are physically unattractive, violent, and unintelligent) and color-blind racism (i.e., arguing that racism is not a problem, but rather, blacks frame themselves as victims). However, the dissenter only argues against the overt racism

and leaves the insinuation that blacks cast themselves as victims (and whites are the true victims of racism) unchallenged.

This does not imply, however, that color-blind racism always goes unchallenged. In a particularly rare example in our sample, one dissenter ignores an overt racist remark and instead challenges a color-blind racist remark:

**Protagonist:** I wish people could just enjoy the video which was put together with a lot of effort just for fun instead of hating on each other. Black white who cares man. We're all human.

**Assistant to Protagonist:** Not true, Niggers are sub-human, boot-lip, horse-gum, cotton picking, ghetto apes. They're that, shit-skinned, mud-people are sub-human...

**Dissenter:** [Addressed to protagonist] its ridiculous to act so color blind.

In this exchange, a user makes a color-blind racist remark (i.e., minimizes the significance of race and, thus, racism), which elicits an overt racist response from a second user. Subsequently, a third user ignores the second user's overt racism and chastises the first user for using color-blind racism.

What is particularly noteworthy about this exchange is that the combative tone of the second user's comment indicates that he or she is trying to argue against the previous comment. Specifically, this user seems to believe that he or she is arguing against dissent, rather than against color-blind racism. Such confusion was not limited to this example alone. In fact, we noted an important recurring theme in our data indicating that users seemed to interpret color-blind racism as dissent against racism. This was most apparent when users employed color-blind racism in an attempt to dissent against another user's racist rhetoric. We call these users *wannabe dissenters*.

Take, for example, the following exchange between a wannabe dissenter and a user who

utilizes racist rhetoric while commenting on a video in which Kanye West claims George W Bush does not care about black victims of Hurricane Katrina:

**Protagonist:** FUCK KANYE WEST THAT FUCKING NIGGER COCKSUCKER! HE DOESNT KNOW SHIT CUZ HES A NIGGER COCKSUCKER FUCK HIM

**Wannabe Dissenter:** Dear Historians from the Year 3000 reading this: Please disregard [protagonist's] comments. He is not a human being but is in fact a racist robot whose programming went hay-wire. *Human beings from the year 2011 do not really believe this.* [emphasis added]

Thus, in this example, a wannabe dissenter clearly offers resistance against another user's overt racism, but perpetuates the color-blind racist belief that racism is not a problem in contemporary society. Similarly, in the following interaction, another wannabe dissenter chastises a user for deploying "the n-word," while simultaneously minimizing this epithet—stripping it of its historical and contemporary power as a tool of oppression.

**Protagonist:** niggers are dangerous people along with latinos.... especially beaners

**Wannabe Dissenter:** The definition of a "nigger" according to Websters (we know racist you don't own any books) "is a ignorant or stupid person." Yes I believe it was talking about YOU. See you "nigger"

Just as wannabe dissenters in our sample used color-blind racism to argue against overt racism, we found that they also used color-blind racism in an attempt to support other users' dissent against racism. In the following exchange, a dissenter argues against a

protagonist who minimizes racism. Subsequently, a third user (i.e., wannabe dissenter) not only agrees with the dissenter's opinion but also conveys color-blind racism by agreeing with the abstract liberalism claim that blacks are as racist as whites.

**Protagonist:** the South was more racist because that is where MOST BLACKS ARE!!! whreever blacks may be is where racism happens, and it goes both ways.... todays blacks are as racist as any white ever was!!!

**Dissenter:** So you are saying that Africa is the most racist continent because thats where most blacks are? You fucking dumb fuck.

**Wannabe Dissenter:** [Addressed to dissenter] he is right about 1 point that some blacks are just as racist as the racist whites but the rest is complete bs

These examples of wannabe dissenters reveal a lot about contemporary racism. Consistent with Bonilla-Silva's (2006) model of color-blind racism, the content of wannabe dissenters' comments suggests that they do not recognize color-blind racism as racist. More importantly, our examples of wannabe dissenters' comments indicate that these users actually mistake color-blind racism for dissent and use it in misguided attempts to combat overt racism. This poses a serious threat to the deconstruction of online racism.

## Conclusion

Far from constituting a nonracial space, past research indicates that the World Wide Web is a domain where race and racism are markedly significant. The limited extant research on general Web sites documents the existence of both overt and color-blind racism online (Hughey 2012b; Hughey and Daniels 2013; Steinfeldt et al. 2010). This is important because it contradicts the work of leading race scholars that

finds, in the off-line world, overt racism is either superseded by color-blind racism or relegated to private spaces (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Myers 2005; Picca and Feagin 2007).

Similar to these existing studies of racism on general Web sites, overt and color-blind racism coexisted in our online sample. However, we believe that our findings significantly extend this body of research by unveiling an important dynamic between these two forms of racism in maintaining power dynamics in online interactions. That is, although deployed separately from one another (i.e., most racist comments tended to *either* include overt rhetoric *or* color-blind rhetoric), our findings suggest that overt racism and color-blind racism may interplay with one another in an instrumental manner that can maintain white privilege. Specifically, in our analysis, users utilized overt rhetoric to lay claim to white spaces, while color-blind rhetoric distorted efforts among users to deconstruct racism.

Results of our analysis indicate that, in our sample, there was a vociferous cadre of users who assumed they were conversing in white spaces—ones that they were vested in preserving. These users launched overt racism toward users who identified as persons of color. Given that the presumption of online anonymity allows users to express themselves in ways that they would not typically do so off-line (Bargh and McKenna 2004; Evans et al. 2003; H. Kennedy 2006), our results suggest that Web users who are threatened by the presence of users of color can easily deploy overt racism as a tool to reclaim white spaces.

These findings underscore the power and invisibility of whiteness. Online spaces are presumed to be nonracial until they are racialized by the presence of users of color. Past studies have alluded to this by suggesting that whites may become uncomfortable, and sometimes flee, an ostensibly nonracial online space when people of color voice their presence (boyd 2011; Kolko 2000; Watkins 2009). However, our study indicates that some users actually engage in aggressive boundary work—perceiving the self-identification of people of color as a threat and actively using

overt racism as a tool to reclaim white spaces. It is important to note, however, that our findings simply indicate that outspoken users in our sample used overt racism as a tool to demarcate racial boundaries. Our methods do not allow us to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of such action (i.e., we do not know whether users of color who read these comments actually fled).

In addition to highlighting the manner in which some users employ overt racism to maintain online forums as white spaces, our analysis indicates that, by stifling dissent, color-blind racism may also play a role in maintaining such racial boundaries. Specifically, we found that users were less likely to dissent against color-blind racism than they were to dissent against overt racism. This is consistent with past research that suggests that color-blind racism, which cloaks itself in race-neutral language, often escapes detection (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Hughey and Daniels 2013). Our analysis, however, reveals just how powerful this cloaking can be.

In fact, we found that color-blind racism was so convincingly veiled that it was mistaken for dissent. This may have negative consequences for the destruction of racism online, as we found that users sometimes employed color-blind racism in an attempt to dissent against more blatant/overt racism. Relatedly, users also circulated color-blind racism in an attempt to support genuine dissent against racism. In both of these scenarios, users whom we label wannabe dissenters missed a valuable opportunity to critique racist attitudes that may maintain white privilege and, instead, they upheld the racial status quo. Thus, extending Bonilla-Silva's (2006) argument that color-blind racism is powerful in its ability to perpetuate contemporary racism and elude dissent, we found that it may be equally powerful in obfuscating the little dissent that it fails to avert.

Overall, we believe this project makes a significant contribution to the literature on race and the Internet by highlighting the instrumental role that racism may play in maintaining white privilege in online spaces; however, generalization of our results is limited by our

sampling method. Particularly, although the rich data we obtained from our purposive sample unveiled important themes in the online maintenance of racial boundaries (i.e., patterns among racial identification, racism, and dissent—as well as wannabe dissent), our use of a nonrandom sample limits the extent to which our findings can be generalized beyond the forums that we analyzed. Future research could test our findings through experimental methods. For example, researchers could plant comments in online forums and analyze responses to those comments based on the systematic manipulation of particular variables (e.g., declaring particular racial identities; integrating overt racism, color-blind racism, dissent, or wannabe dissent into comments). Such an analysis could provide valuable information on the generalizability of our findings, which we believe highlight important patterns in the maintenance of white privilege in contemporary, digital, interactions.

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### Notes

1. YouTube is not monitored (i.e., YouTube staff do not actively review comments for inappropriate comment without being promoted to do

so by users). However, YouTube staff review, and reserve the right to remove, comments that users flag as offensive or inappropriate. As outlined in the YouTube Community Guidelines, YouTube may permanently ban users who proliferate hate speech.

2. We omitted the singular term “race” because it produced videos of no relevance to racial matters (e.g., videos of sporting events).
3. Our five search terms yielded overlapping results, explaining why our sample reached 20, instead of 25. YouTube classified the videos in our sample as being most popular among adult males ages 25 to 44. Demographic information for users’ race, socioeconomic status, and geographic location are unavailable.
4. We believe the extent to which removed comments affected our sample is small, as we replaced less than 5 percent of initially sampled comments because they had been removed.
5. We do not report the two visibility variables in our statistical tables because the magnitude of their coefficients (and standard errors) rounded to zero across all models. However, we retained these variables in our models because (1) their coefficients frequently reached levels of statistical significance and (2) omitting them from the models affected the significance and magnitude of other variables.
6. Results, which control for video content, indicate that comments posted in reaction to videos containing racism exhibit greater odds of containing racism and dissent—suggesting that context matters.

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