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From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation

André Brock

“He can read my writing but he sho can’t read my mind.”
—Zora Neale Hurston

Twitter’s combination of brevity, multi-platform access, and feedback mechanisms has enabled it to gain mindshare far out of proportion to its actual user base, including an extraordinary number of Black users. How best to understand Twitter’s reception and uptake by Black Americans, who surprisingly comprise over a quarter of all U.S. Twitter users? This article approaches Twitter from two perspectives: an analysis of the interface and associated practices alongside critical discourse analyses of online discussions of Twitter’s utility and audience. This dual analysis employs critical race and technocultural theory to understand how mainstream online authors (out-group) and Black online authors (in-group) articulate Twitter as a racial artifact employing technocultural practices. Initial findings indicate that Twitter’s feature set and multi-platform presence play major roles in mediating cultural performances by Twitter users. These same features also, depending upon the racial affiliation of the discussant, mediate how those cultural performances are understood: for example, Twitter was seen as a venue for civic activism (or public sphere) or as an active facilitator of deficit-based Black cultural stereotypes. Of particular interest are the complex reactions offered by minority and mainstream commenters on the “appropriateness” of Twitter as a Black cultural outlet.

Black Internet usage has become increasingly visible thanks to the integration of social media into our everyday communication habits. Consider “Black Twitter,” the discovery that Black usage of the popular social media service at times dominated Twitter discourse. This went against popular perceptions of White-dominated Internet use. Smith (2011) found that 25% of online Blacks used Twitter, compared to 9% of online Whites. Online reactions to Black Twitter focused on the significance of Black cultural “trending topics” to the new messaging service, either in support of their cultural specificity or to disparage their contributions.

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Initially seen as the province of geeks, Twitter’s subsequent uptake by celebrities increased its mindshare and user base but early reactions to the service dwelt upon the perceived banality and narcissism of the content. In 2009, however, Fox, Zickuhr, and Smith found that Blacks used Twitter disproportionately more than other demographic groups. Soon after, online commentaries on these findings surfaced, and the mainstream media chimed in soon after. Black blogosphere and commentariat responses exploded following the publication of a Slate article on the topic (Manjoo, 2010).

This article juxtaposes these commentaries against a close reading of Twitter’s interface, using critical technoculture discourse analysis (CTDA). CTDA applies critical race and technoculture theories to IT artifacts and accompanying online conversations to analyze technology’s cultural and discursive construction. My data are the Twitter interface—particularly the platform’s reach and discourse conventions—analyzed alongside selected online commentary discussing the Black Twitter phenomenon.

Twitter’s discourse conventions, ubiquity, and social features encouraged increased Black participation; Black Twitter is Twitter’s mediation of Black cultural discourse, or “signifyin’” (Gates, 1983). In particular, Black hashtag signifying revealed alternate Twitter discourses to the mainstream and encourages a formulation of Black Twitter as a “social public”; a community constructed through their use of social media by outsiders and insiders alike. After examining online responses to Black Twitter, I close by discussing how racial and technocultural ideologies shape perceptions of minority tech use to speculate on how to understand technology as a cultural, rather than simply social, endeavor.

Research Background

boyd and Ellison (2007) define social network services (SNS) as web-based services featuring profiles, lists of social connections, and the capability to view and navigate profiles, connections, and user-generated content. Many SNS allow comments. Twitter differs from other SNS in that the “comment,” or Tweet—not profiles or networks—is the site’s focal point. Hoffman and Novak (2000) noted that a lack of Black-oriented online content should be considered as a primary determinant of the digital divide. As Byrne (2008) pointed out, BlackPlanet.com’s 16 million users serve as evidence that sites promoting Black cultural interactivity can become enormously popular. Accordingly, Black Twitter can be understood as a user-generated source of culturally relevant online content, combining social network elements and broadcast principles to share information.

Some research on Twitter takes an instrumental approach, which while capable of perceiving and measuring social interaction quantitatively, assumes that Twitter is culturally neutral. Although Twitter has been examined as a social microblog (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007), as a social network (Huberman, Romero, & Wu,
2008), and as a messaging application (Krishnamurthy, Gill, & Arlitt, 2008), there are cultural affordances that are missed by each of these approaches.

Turning to communications research on Twitter, Marwick and boyd (2011) argue that Twitter users imagine their audience, citing Scheidt’s (2006) statement that online audiences exist only as written into the text through stylistic and linguistic choices. However, in examining uses of Twitter’s “@” function, Honeycutt and Herring (2009) found that it enabled direct conversations by reinforcing addressivity. Tweets including the @ were “more likely to provide information for others and more likely to exhort others to do something” (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009, p. 7). Zhao and Rosson (2009) found that Twitter’s “follow” mechanism serves to curate content, allowing users to build personal information environments centered around topics and people of interest. Frequent, brief updates reduced the time necessary for interaction with others, paradoxically allowing users to feel stronger connections to their Twitter contacts. Twitter’s capability for real-time updates on current events or social activities increased engagement as well.

To recap: Twitter’s temporal, electronic, and structural discourse mediation encourages weak tie (Granovetter, 1973) relationships between groups through informal communication practices. Analyzing Twitter as an information source captures data about social use and information types, but elides cultural communicative practices. Communication studies research offers greater insight into sociocultural rationales for Twitter usage, but such research rarely examines the influence of race on online discourse. The following examples and reactions to Black Twitter’s online articulations of Black discursive culture serve the dual purpose of illustrating how culture shapes online social interactions; they also show how Twitter’s interface and discourses conventions helped to frame external perceptions of Black Twitter as a social public.

**Method**

Critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) draws from technology studies, communication studies, and critical race theory to understand how culture shapes technologies. CTDA has been used to examine racial presentations in videogames (Brock, 2011) and race and gender on blogs (Brock, Kvasny, & Hales, 2010). CTDA works to subvert instrumental or deterministic accounts of interactions between people and technology, by looking at the artifact’s interpellation (Althusser, 1971) by its users. Like Herring’s (2001) Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis, CTDA is a technique rather than a method; it draws energy from Nakamura’s (2006) argument that Internet studies should match considerations of form, the user, and the interface with an attention to the ideologies that underlie them.

Omi and Winant (1994) contend that race is a matter of social structure and cultural representation, or racial formation. The Internet, as a social structure, represents and maintains Western culture through its content and often embodies Western
ideology through its design and practices. Pacey (1985) noted that popular conceptions of technology neglect beliefs about technologies and encourage perceptions of technology as “value-neutral.” This perspective preserves existing social hierarchies through technology dissemination, design, and use. Internet users, content providers, and designers filter their Internet experiences through racial frames as they redistribute online resources (e.g., attention/audience, cultural capital, political capital) along racial lines.

**Technoculture**

Dinerstein (2006) defines American technoculture as a matrix of six qualities: progress, religion, modernity, Whiteness, masculinity, and the future; extending Carey’s (2009) argument that communication technologies transmit beliefs encoded within information. Carey added that communication technologies extend the range of reception of Western ideologies while diminishing the amount of participation to discuss them critically (Carey, 2009, p. 136). Communication through these new technologies is promoted as value-free information transfer or as an opportunity to transmit culture to those less fortunate. Like other cultural objects, technology influences and mediates racial and cultural identity. In the United States, technology often reinforces long-standing American racial practices, and racialized discourses about proficiency and information literacy play a part in the design, deployment, and use of ICTs.

**Racial Formation: Whiteness.**

American identity is bounded and extended by negative stereotypes of Black identity (Morrison, 1993). Giroux (1996) adds that, “whiteness represents itself as a universal marker for being civilized and in doing so posits the Other within the language of pathology, fear, madness, and degeneration” (p. 75). Dyer (1999) contends that White identity is founded upon a paradox; that Whiteness entails being a “sort of” race and the human race as well as both an individual subject and a representation of the universal subject.

**Racial Formation: Blackness.**

W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), in his formulation of “double consciousness,” argued that Blackness was a conflicted identity shaped by multiple discourses. For Du Bois, personal Black identity is the intersection between Black communal solidarity and a national White supremacist ideology. His formulation acknowledges the hegemony of Whiteness without privileging it over the agency and spiritual energy found within the Black community.
Signifyin’ as Black Discursive Identity.

This article’s analytical framework relies heavily upon signification’s discursive constitution of Black identity (Gates, 1983; Mitchell-Kerman, [1972] 1999; Smitherman, 1977). Signifyin’ draws upon Saussure’s ([1916], 1974, p. 67) sign/signifier/signified, but purposefully reformulates that definition to draw attention to the signifier as the playfully multi-valent interlocutor while the signified evolves from form to object. Thus, signifyin’ becomes a practice where the interlocutor inventively redefines an object using Black cultural commonplaces and philosophy. For example, Gates (1983) defines signifyin’ as

A rhetorical practice unengaged in information giving. Signifying turns on the play and chain of signifiers . . . the “signifier as such” in Julia Kristeva’s phrase, [is] a “presence that precedes the signification of object or emotion.” (pp. 688–9)

Smitherman (1977) adds call-and-response and tonal semantics to Gates’ definition, highlighting audience participation and inflection. Both authors carefully point out that limiting signifyin’ to insult or misdirection is reductive; it is the articulation of a shared worldview, where recognition of the forms plus participation in the wordplay signals membership in the Black community. Black discourse, from this perspective, moves from bland information transfer to become a communal commentary upon political and personal realities.

Finally, Hughes ([1971], 1993) argues that cultural traits are group attributes; the group is not the synthesis of its traits. Black Twitter does not represent the entirety of Black online presence, nor do the multitude of racist responses to the phenomenon comprise the entirety of the racial matrix within which Black Twitter is understood. Thus, I analyzed the interface’s mediation of Blackness and responses to that mediation drawing from technocultural and racial ideologies, in keeping with my goal of understanding how racial beliefs shape technology use.

Background: “Black” Twitter?!

The initial coining of “Black Twitter” is commonly attributed to Choire Sicha’s (2009) article, “What Were Black People Talking About on Twitter Last Night” (Manjoo, 2010). Dash (2008) however, presciently prefigured discussions of Twitter’s functional remediation through Black discourse. In “Yo’ Mama’s So Fat,” Dash reflected upon using Twitter for political “yo mama” jokes:

Playing the dozens is a uniquely and explicitly African American tradition . . . it seems to me like the playfulness of the language and the absurdity of the medium may have masked something timely and fitting. This obviously and intrinsically black tradition has been adopted by a community like Twitter that is, frankly, disproportionately not black. You could see it as the deracination of the tradition, or even worse as a deliberate omission of cultural context in its appropriation. But I actually see it as something positive.
Dash’s speculation on Twitter’s demographics was unsourced, but later proven correct. His statement about deracination through context, however, frames Twitter as a “value-neutral” service; it becomes remarkable that Black discourse can be employed effectively over a medium designed for a small, technologically proficient, mostly White user base. Promoting the technosocial mediation of Black culture by non-blacks as a “positive,” however, only accrues social and technical capital to non-Blacks. When Black users employed Black discourse on Twitter, significantly different opinions emerged.

Also predating Sicha’s article, Wilson (2009) identified the following elements of Black discursive style on Twitter:

1) A culturally relevant hashtag\(^1\) (cultural specificity)
2) Network participation (either a comment or a retweet) by tightly linked affiliates (homophily)
3) Viral spread to reach “trending topic” status (propagation).

Wilson didn’t specifically label these attributes as an instantiation of Black Twitter, but his informal analysis of the cultural specificity, homophilic, and memetic features of Black provide the beginnings of a technocultural explanation of the phenomenon.

Black Twitter’s public element revolves around the hashtag, a user-created meta-discourse convention. The hashtag (“#topic”) was initially deployed to filter and organize multiple Tweets on a particular topic (Messina, 2007). Initially intended as a curational feature, hashtags quickly evolved into an expressive modifier to contextualize the brusque, brief Tweet. The hashtag’s evolution, I argue, led to the “discovery” of Black Twitter. Black Twitter hashtag domination of the Trending Topics allowed outsiders to view Black discourse that was (and still is) unconcerned with the mainstream gaze.

While hashtags predate trending topics, both played a role in exposing Black Twitter to a mainstream unconcerned with its prior existence. Twitter’s enormous volume of tweets effectively obscured the activities of groups of users; third-party solutions provided some means to filter the stream but were of limited use to the general user. Hashtags and trending topics filtered Twitter in a way that not only identified topics of interest, but who was generating those topics.

To recap: racial and technocultural ideology play a part in understanding how online discourse “works.” White participation in online activities is rarely understood as constitutive of White identity; instead we are trained to understand their online activities as stuff “people” do. Black Twitter confounded this ingrained understanding, even while using the same functions and apparatus, by making more apparent through external observation and internal interaction how culture shapes online discourses.
Twitter: Interface Analysis

Digital divide research rests upon deficit models of Internet usage (Selwyn, 2004), arguing that those on the wrong side of the divide lack material access or technical literacies. Mobile Internet access over the last decade has bridged the divide to a certain extent; Fox, Zickuhr, and Smith (2009) found that 54% of Internet users access through a mobile device and of those, 24% use Twitter or another service. Horrigan (2009), reporting on wireless Internet use, wrote:

Two measures of engagement with the wireless online—accessing the Internet on a handheld on the typical day or ever—shows that African Americans are 70% more likely to do this than White Americans.

Smith (2010) found that 64% of African-Americans are wireless Internet users, and 87% of Blacks and Hispanics own a cell phone, compared with 80% of Whites. He updated Fox et al.’s findings to discover 95% of Twitter users own a mobile phone, nearly half of mobile users access Twitter from their phone’s client, and that one in ten Blacks access Twitter on a typical day, a rate nearly four times that of Whites (Smith, 2011). Taken together, these findings suggest that while Twitter may map discursively onto Black discourse, there are material and functional rationales for Black Twitter usage as well.

Affordances: Minimalism and Malleability

I conducted a close reading of the affordances (Norman, 1999) and discourse conventions of Twitter-as-a-service as part of my argument that these interface elements contribute to the Black Twitter phenomenon. Norman defines affordances, or more precisely “perceived affordances,” as design that relies upon “what actions the user perceives to be possible,” rather than what is true. Twitter’s minimalism and subsequent malleability, then, are perceived affordances that help to shape cultural uses of the service. The cultural conventions—message length, hashtags, and the trending topic—map onto performativity, signifyin’, and publicness in ways that add an unexpected sociocultural dimension to the service.

The interfaces of most social network services (SNS) tend to follow a browser-determined pattern: widgets, photo galleries, applications, and advertising. Twitter stands apart from these browser-based SNS in its simplicity. The service’s message format is a primary determinant of this affordance; Twitter was originally designed as a Short Messaging Service (SMS) to connect people in small groups using text messages. SMS messages are 160 characters long; Twitter messages are 140 characters (including attribution), allowing Tweets to traverse SMS networks without truncation. Sagolla (2009) wrote that Jack Dorsey’s idea was to make it “so simple that you don’t even think about what you’re doing, you just type something and send it” (para. 3).
“Just type something and send it” as a design principle, demands that the client become as transparent to the process as possible. The limitation of 140 characters enabled Twitter to be used on millions of “feature phones” and smartphones—regardless of operating system or manufacturer—as well as IM protocols. For those using SMS, the Twitter shortcode is “40404,” and the interface is a series of threaded messages organized by time received. One could also send messages using Twitter’s Web site or 3rd party clients on Windows, Mac OS X, Unix, and Linux. For those using the Web, Twitter’s interface is a two-column page prominently featuring the user’s Twitter feed; a floating header (for navigation and a user profile) is minimally present at the top of the page. A plethora of third party clients and services are available, thanks to an early release of its API and subsequent uptake by developers. While these clients add features such as multiple logins and organizational features, the focal point of all of these interfaces/clients is the message and the message stream.

Unlike other SNS, Twitter is not restricted to certain types of Internet access, client access, or protocol. For example, try Facebook on a mobile browser; Facebook was designed for the web browser in 2004, prior to the introduction of the modern smartphone. Facebook has long been criticized for its poor mobile offerings even as burgeoning mobile Facebook access threatens to destabilize its advertising revenue. Twitter’s minimalism allowed mobile access from the beginning, enabling Twitter users to integrate Tweeting into their everyday communication patterns (similar to the rise of SMS). According to tracking service TwitStat (“Twitter Clients,” 2010), nearly 300 different clients accessed the Twitter API to publish Tweets. Twitter’s Web site was the primary source of access, but Foursquare, Google, Facebook, and Flickr all allow their users to share information on Twitter.

The material affordances necessary to use Twitter—an Internet-connected computer, screen, and input device—are thus reduced (or nerfed, in gaming terms) to allow Twitter access to the widest possible number of ICT configurations by design. Given the statistics I cited earlier on Black mobile Internet access and Twitter usage, my analysis suggests that Twitter’s minimalist aesthetic and ease of material access play a role in Black adoption of the service.

Twitter’s Cultural Conventions: Signifyin’ as Performativity and Publicness

Twitter’s social mechanism—publish to a network of followers/read information from a network of users one follows—provides a cultural context for decoding the information received. Bollen, Goncalves, Ruan, and Mao (2011) found that Twitter users either prefer the company of users with similar values or converge on their Friends’ values. They speculate:

This may confirm the notion that distinct socio-cultural factors affect the expression of emotion and mood on Twitter, and cause users to cluster according to their degree of expressiveness. (p. 248)
In discursive identity construction, such as that found on Twitter, homophilic associations are reinforced by the use of cultural commonplaces. Thus, I argue that Black Twitter discourse can be understood as signifyin’ (Gates, 1983), where the Black Twitterer is the “signifier.” The hashtag serves triple duty as “signifier,” “sign,” and, “signified,” marking as it does the concept to be signified, the cultural context within which the tweet should be understood, and the “call” awaiting a response.

Consider the following screen capture from an archived Twitter search for the hashtag #NewTVOneShows. Part of a larger thread to be discussed later, note that the Twitter user signals their part in the performance by including the hashtag and adding incisive commentary on it. The Tweet includes a reference to Black food culture (pumpkin pie), Black identity norms (we don’t eat it), and cultural commonplaces (the TV One hashtag) in less than 140 characters, as part of a quickly flowing conversation.

Tweet-as-signifyin’, then, can be understood as a discursive, public performance of Black identity. In Saussurean terms, the signifier is “the psychological impression of a sound” ([1916] 1974, p. 66). Gates (1983) defines signifyin’ in multiple dimensions: the person doing the signifyin’ performing a message that only represents part of the intended communication. He adds, “one does not signify something; one signifies in some way [emphasis original]” (1983, p. 689). Tweet-as-signifier can be seen as representing communicative conventions: message (presence), social affiliation (audience), and interest in the subject, tightly constrained by brevity and concision.

Walcott (1972), writing about the influence of space and style on Black discourse, notes that:

On the public level, the individual as stylist operates on a plane, or more accurately, out of a sphere of interest usually defined from the white point of view as entertainment [emphasis mine] and, more profitably, from the Black or theoretical point as ritual drama or dialectical catharsis [emphasis mine]. (p. 9)

Walcott defines ritual as “a highly stylized structure perceived and laid out in space” (1972, p. 9). This cleanly fits Twitter’s communicative conventions: 140 characters in which to proclaim something of interest, where interactants are addressed by name and context delivered in shorthand (the hashtag). Marwick and boyd (2011) argue that Twitter, like other social media, collapses context and enforces a univocal identity presentation. I argue instead that Twitter’s strict 140-character limit encourages discursive performativity and creativity (both hallmarks of signifyin’) within boundaries of time and space. This resultant identity display differs from other SNS, where social capital accrues from the public display of connections (boyd & Ellison, 2007), or carefully managed self-presentation through multimedia (Ellison, 2008).

Reframing Black Twitter as ritual drama, then, highlights the structure, engagement, invention, and performances of these Twitter users employing cultural touch points of humor, spectacle, or crisis to construct discursive racial identity. Performativity is a crucial element of signifyin’, and is immediately obvious in the case
of Black Twitter. Walcott (1972) explains the influence of space and style on Black discourse

One’s personal victory, then, is achieved through the fashioning of an individual style that will enable one to operate in space... indeed to come to invigorate the space in which one finds oneself with a sense of oneself, one’s vision, values, limitations, resources, aims. (p. 9)

My final warrant for Tweet-as-signifier draws from Tal’s (1996) observation that the construction of online identity is in many analogous to Du Bois’ “double consciousness.” Our online persona is the uneasy reconciliation of offline multiplicity and online fixity. “Context collapse” (Marwick & boyd, 2011) is one way to understand how the textual primacy of social media “fixes” identity. I argue here that online fixity is the assumption that online visitors either occupy an online “normal” identity: White, male, middle class, and hetero; or they are so diverse that their cultural origins cannot (or should not) be ascertained. Black Twitter’s use of Twitter’s rigid format to articulate Black discursive styles and cultural iconography subverts mainstream expectations of Twitter demographics, discourses, and utility. These technocultural displays of Black identity would have gone unnoticed by the wider world except for the visibility offered by another signifier, the hashtag.

Hashtags

The hashtag, a user-created metadiscourse convention (# + keyword), was coined to coordinate Twitter conversations by providing topical coherence (Messina, 2007). Although Messina recounts that he pitched the concept to Twitter, the company chose to filter topics computationally, a process that became known as the “trending topic” algorithm.

Trending topics are not the same as hashtags, although they both serve to organize Twitter conversations. Hashtags are folksonomic (Mathes, 2004), and as Huang, Thornton, and Efthimidias (2009) point out, are situated *a priori* for users to situate their message within a wider real-time conversation, rather than *a posteriori* to facilitate retrieval. Trending topics, on the other hand, are intended to capture topics enjoying a surge in popularity (Gillespie, 2011). To do so, the algorithm looks at the number of tweets on a common topic and the rate of propagation across multiple clusters of Twitter users. By doing so, the trending topic tries to identify breaking topics, rather than the enormous stream of tweets generated daily by the “Beliebers” or the “Barbs.”

Previously, I argued that hashtags serve as sign, signifier, and signified in Black Twitter discourse. Mitchell-Kernan ([1972], 1999) similarly describes signifyin’ practice:

The hearer is thus constrained to attend to all potential—carrying symbolic systems in speech events ... the context embeddedness of meaning is attested to by both
our reliance on the given context and, most important, by our inclination to construct additional context from our background knowledge of the world. (p. 311)

The hashtag, originally intended to collate conversations around an external topic, thus becomes a call for Black Twitter participants to recognize performance and respond in kind. Without the context of the signifying Twitterer and text, however, it’s not always clear which hashtags are Black Twitter tags. For example, observe What the Trend’s list of top hashtags of 2010 (Figure 2).

Walcott (1972) argues that command of the form is paramount for Black discourse:

Accustomed to, and perhaps most at home participating in ritual, the stylist is a performer, a man who moves in space, who attracts attention and employs it in defining himself. (p. 9)

The signifying hashtag invites an audience, even more so than the publication of a Tweet to one’s followers, by setting the parameters of the discourse to follow. It’s also a signal that the Twitterer is part of a larger community and displays her knowledge of the practice, the discourse, and the group’s worldview. Black Twitter tags can be encoded in African American Vernacular English, but do not have to be: the user’s identity, her followers (and followed), and the command of the form all play a role.

Smitherman (1977) defines “call and response” as a practice where the speaker either requests a specific response from the audience or elicits extemporaneous audience responses by appeals to cultural commonplaces. Call and response interactions build consensus either by completion of the original statement or through affirmation of the speaker’s intent.

In Figure 3, observe how Black Twitter’s use of hashtags employs call and response: FreedomReeves begins the call with the hashtag #NewTVOneShows, and in the above screen capture RenishaRenewed acknowledges the call and expands upon it. The hashtag refers to the Black-owned cable channel, TV One; these Twitterers are humorously proposing culturally relevant shows for the fledgling network. Note that FreedomReeves does not address her tweet to TV One’s Twitter account (@tvonetv). Rather, TV One is the “sign” upon which she is signifying.

Hashtags, for Black Twitter, also enable the signifying practice of tonal semantics or “voice rhythm and vocal inflection to convey meaning in Black communication” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 134). Banks (2004), writing about tonal semantics on BlackPlanet.com chat discourse, notes that typographic features such as parentheses and punctuation were used to denote affection, dislike, or respect between members. Hashtags serve a similar function for Black Twitter; instead of serving as a relational signal between individuals, they signal a shift from whatever else is going on to a critical yet playful discourse style. They differentiate individual tweets as part of communal word play and identity construction, rather than insult or banality. Hashtags enable Twitter to mediate communal identities in near-real time; allowing participants to act individually yet en masse while still being heard.
Figure 2
http://whatthetrend.com 2010 Top Twitter Trends

Top Hashtags

*Well over 1000 hashtags trended in 2010. These hashtags below appeared most often in the trending topics list.*

#nowplaying
#FF
#musicmonday
#followfriday
#omgfacts
#iDoit2
#ohjustlikeme
#ZodiacFacts
#LetsBeHonest
#MM
#TLS
#ihatequotes
#in2010
#iloveitwhen
#threewordsforyou
#ReTweetThisIf
#rememberwhen
#TheresNothingLike
#thingsimiss
#alliwan
#SlapYourself
#wheniwaslittle
#confessiontime
#imtiredof
#whenifirstmet
#myquestionis
#honestyhour
#iwannaknowwhy
#icantlivewithout
#whywebrokeup
Twitter’s publication mechanism makes it difficult to keep track of conversations: all public Tweets are posted to @public timeline (once featured on the home page, but no longer) and simultaneously to a user’s followers. The public timeline is near incomprehensible thanks to volume and lack of context, and conversations between subscribers draw context from their shared interests. Trending topics, then, attempt to highlight the conversational nature of the service by indicating topics of interest. Where hashtags indicate group-level discourse, their use by Black Twitter often brings them to the attention of the trending topic algorithm, which is how the mainstream became aware of the phenomenon.

Black Twitter’s visibility via the trending topic algorithm—and the resultant othering of those conversations—led to Black Twitter’s framing as an intervention on “White public space” (Hill, 1995). Hill defines White public space as “a morally significant set of contexts in which Whites are invisibly normal, and in which racialized populations are visibly marginal” (p. 62). This public space is constructed by intense monitoring of non-White speakers, along with the invisibility of almost identical signs in White discourse. In the previous sections I examined how Twitter’s design principles indirectly encouraged Black mobile participation in the service, as well as how tweets and hashtags (artifacts) can mediate Black cultural discourse (practice). The following section examines the racial and technocultural beliefs about Black Twitter, expressed in selected online discourses.
Discourse Analysis: Reactions to Black Twitter

I examined three Web sites discussing Black Twitter: a White-authored personal blog, a technology column penned by a non-White journalist, and the personal blog of a Black journalist. These sites are not definitive examples of their respective ethnic groups; Omi and Winant’s (1984) racial formation theory, however, argues that individual acts of racial representation draw from social structure and Hughes ([1971], 1993) defines ethnic identity as practices and beliefs that the in-group and the out-group agree can be attributed to the in-group. Therefore, while these Web sites are not wholly representative, the authors recognize Black Twitter based upon their relationship to Black identity and online culture.

White Perspective/Too Much Nick

One of the original contributors to the “Blacks on Twitter” conversation was Nick Douglas, on his personal blog “Too Much Nick.” In “Micah’s ‘Black people on Twitter’ theory” (Douglas, 2009), Douglas mentioned a friend’s comment on non-geek Twitter activity:

“...These people don’t have real [emphasis mine] Twitter friends. So they all respond to trending topics. And that’s the game, that’s how they use Twitter."

Douglas’ post implies that Twitter is for geeks, defined as “white guys with collars and spelling.” In contrast, non-geeky people “use text-speak” and are “minorities, women, and teens.”

Rawls (2000), writing about White/Black interactions, notes:

”While Black and White appear to occupy the same world geographically, they rarely occupy the same interactional space... even when they do more often jointly occupy interactional space... the display of moral behavior by members of one group may well look like deviant behavior to members of the other.” [emphasis mine] (p. 247)

For Douglas, only certain folk Tweet correctly: standard English-speaking, White professional, male technologists, or “geeks.” From this racial and technocultural context, Twitter becomes an informational space and social network for White tech elites.

Mainstream Perspective/Slate.com

Manjoo (2010) triggered the “tipping point” for Black Twitter’s perception by the wider world. Although writers in other online venues had noted Black trending topics, Manjoo’s (2010) article, “How Black People Use Twitter” definitively presented itself as “The latest research on race and microblogging.” Manjoo’s article
is notable for presenting a technocultural (rather than simply ethnocentric) rationale for Black Twitter usage.

Manjoo suggested that Black Twitter networks tended to be densely homophilic and more reciprocal than other nodes. Reciprocity, on Twitter, measures the ratio of followers to followed; most Twitter users tend to have fewer followers and follow people that don’t reciprocate. Manjoo found that most Black Twitter participants had a reciprocity ratio of nearly 1:1, suggesting that Blacks used Twitter as a “public instant messenger” to connect with friends.

Manjoo used nuanced racial rationales to explain Black Twitter as well. Noting a relationship between “the Dozens” (signifyin’) and Black Twitter discourse, he wrote:

The Dozens theory is compelling but not airtight... a lot of these tags don’t really fit the format of the Dozens—they don’t feature people one-upping one another with witty insults. Instead, the ones that seem to hit big are those that comment on race, love, sex, and stereotypes about black culture... the bigger reason why the Dozens theory isn’t a silver bullet is that... people of all races insult one another online in general, and on Twitter specifically. We don’t usually see those trends hit the top spot.

The reasoning here is sound; Manjoo correctly identifies Black Twitter discourse as a cultural perspective. Moreover, he supports his own argument on homophily by noting that the density of Black Twitter networks leads to their domination of trending topics, not their tendency to insult one another. Manjoo closes on another positive note, claiming that Black Twitter was the actions of a specific set of highly engaged Twitter users, rather than typical of all Blacks on Twitter.

Despite Manjoo’s balanced racial and technocultural approach, the column introduced itself as an authority on racial online activity, bolstered by its publication in a mainstream news site and subsequent uptake. Many in the Black blogosphere were incensed by Manjoo’s urban/male characterization of Black Twitter, including a writer on the next Web site, postbourgie.com

Black Perspective/Postbourgie

Shani Hilton (2010), writing as shani-o, responded to Manjoo’s article on postbourgie.com. Her post, “You can tweet like this or you can tweet like that or you can tweet like us,” takes an analytical racial approach to Black Twitter. Her response criticizes Manjoo’s authoritative stance on Black Twitter activity, suggesting that he served as a tour guide for “befuddled and bemused Whites” because “the ways of Black folk are so mysterious.”

Hilton (2010) acknowledged using Twitter and that Black Twitter hashtags, “some very tempting to join in on,” had crept into her timeline. She defines Black Twitter discourse:
Black people on Twitter, just as they do in real life, maintain tight-knit communities where they trade jokes, bicker, and play with each other. The same could be said about any other community using the site.

She adds a technocultural analysis of Black online access:

To address the question about the “dominance” of black Twitterers, I believe the answer lies somewhere in this combination of pretty mundane facts: Poor and working class people are more likely to access the Internet through mobile devices…. Young black people on Twitter are right on trend. That is, when a large percentage of a racial group is young and doesn’t have a lot of money, they’re going to dominate a free service that ties in perfectly with their most common mode of communication.

Hilton accepts Black Twitter as normal, rather than a game; perhaps because of her own participation. Similarly, she marks their discourse as common to all Twitter users. To close her post, she asks for mainstream understanding of Black heterogeneity, online and offline, reinforcing Manjoo’s point that Black Twitter is a subgroup of all Black Twitter users, rather than the entirety.

Rawls (2000), writing on Black discursive identity, notes:

While Whites … are accountable to only one community and one set of values, there are two separate peoples to whom the African American self is accountable. If actions fulfill the ideals of the one group, without fulfilling the ideals of the other at the same time, this is a problem that “belongs” to the African American self, but not to the White self. (p. 245)

This quote clearly supports Hilton’s analysis. She claims and acknowledges the actions of poor young Blacks, marking their activity as American cultural normal and technocultural normal. Her articulation of Black technological prowess—reading Black Twitterers as agentive and tech literate—by using statistical finds to bolster her belief counters the moral and functional racial technology narrative presented by Douglas. Hilton’s analysis also adds nuance to Manjoo’s article, by presenting activities from an emic perspective.

Discussion: Interfaces, Practices, and Beliefs

I examined Twitter’s interface and features to understand how Twitter’s technology mediated Black culture while scrutinizing online discourses about Black Twitter to understand how culture frames technology practice. I found that a tweet’s content coupled with a topical hashtag, when leavened with cultural commonplaces, could enrich communal bonds between networked Twitter users; this happens regardless of cultural affiliation. Black Twitter exemplifies this phenomenon, but racial and technocultural ideologies brought it attention thanks to pejorative perceptions of Black technology use.
Black discursive culture—specifically signifyin’s focus on invention, delivery, ritual, and audience participation—maps well onto Twitter’s focus on rapid discussion between groups of connected users. Twitter’s ubiquity and ambiguity—design decisions made to encourage adoption of the service—enabled material access to the service with little loss of functionality; an important point to realize when considering that Blacks access the Internet (and Twitter) primarily through mobile devices. Black Twitter illuminates Twitter’s role as a cultural communication medium, transcending the size limitations and conversational incoherence of chat rooms, while allowing users to participate in open-ended community building discourses in near real-time.

Equally illuminating is the role that technocultural and racial ideologies played in shaping reactions to Black Twitter. While my discourse analysis was performed on a very small scale, I conducted it thusly to triangulate beliefs about race and technology use framed by Black Twitter perceptions. Where Whiteness and tech expertise were ascendant, Black Twitter was viewed as a game and a waste of resources. Where Blackness and tech expertise was ascendant, Black Twitter was understood as the mediated articulations of a Black subculture.

Conclusions

Black Twitter came to online prominence through creative use of Twitter’s hashtag function and subsequent domination of Twitter’s “trending topics.” I tread carefully here; Black folk have been Twitter users from “jump.” Drawing from Hughes’ ([1971], 1993) definition of ethnic groups, however, I argue that Black Twitter coalesced through the recognition of the unique practices of the group by in-group and out-group observers alike. To this I add Hughes’ observation that cultural behaviors are attributes of an ethnic group; the group is not defined by those attributes. Thus, “Black Twitter” is best understood as a “public group of specific Twitter users” rather than a “Black online public.”

That being said, Black Twitter can be understood as a “public”; albeit a terribly understudied one. Like other Black online activities, Black Twitter would have been considered “niche” without the intervention of the hashtag/trending topic. These two features brought the activities of tech literate Blacks to mainstream attention, contravening popular conceptions of Black capitulation to the digital divide. Hilton’s recognition and Douglas’ disparagement highlight the formation of the group, while Manjoo’s column signaled Black Twitter’s “arrival.”

Typically, social networks gain popularity and public notice as users encourage their networks to adopt them. Viral spread across multiple online venues (e.g., email, IM, YouTube) then leads to the recognition of “social public” by academics, pundits, and the mainstream. Black Twitter did neither of those things: Black Twitter discourse works best on Twitter, although similar cultural commonplaces are employed wherever Blacks congregate. Nor is it clear how many Black Twitter users engage in Black Twitter discourse practices. In fact, as more Blacks adopt Twitter
and their hashtags no longer dominate trending topics, the “publicness” of Black Twitter will return to the audience most involved: Black folk.

This research was simultaneously made easier and more difficult by race, as this special issue’s focus on “social publics” encourages analyses of easily defined online communities. If my intent were to mark White discursive styles and practices based upon Twitter usage as a “social public,” I would have had to disambiguate based upon class, sexuality, or other demographics. That Black Twitter is often portrayed as representative of the entire Black community despite the heterogeneity of Black culture speaks to the power of American racial ideology’s framing of Black identity as monoculture. I deliberately omitted mention of the more egregious racist responses to Black Twitter, intent on presenting Black Twitter as the technological mediation of a specific cultural discourse rather than as the product of fevered online fantasies of degenerative Black online behavior. Although these fantasies are much more vivid and easily disparaged, focusing upon them moves the gaze to White framings of Black activity, rather than Black Twitter’s creativity and tech literacy. Examining egregious online racism while ignoring more subtle, structural forms of online discrimination is problematic; equally as problematic is social science and communication research that attempts to preserve a color-blind perspective on online endeavors by normalizing Whiteness and othering everyone else. It is my hope that this article sparks a conversation about both practices.

Notes

1 A “hashtag” is a user-generated Twitter discourse convention intended to facilitate the curation of tweets about a particular topic using Twitter’s limited search capabilities.
2 Twitter messages can be addressed to other users by including “@username.”
3 As of December 30, 2011. Twitter frequently changes the Web interface to implement new service features.
4 Archive available from: http://archivist.visitmix.com/DocDre/2
5 TV One is a Black-owned cable channel providing content specifically for Black families.
6 Twitter followers of Justin Bieber (22 million) and Nicki Minaj (12 million), respectively.
8 The majority #NewTVOneShows hashtagged conversation took place over approximately 3 hours; it never reached “trending topic” status.
9 http://toomucnick.com

References


