

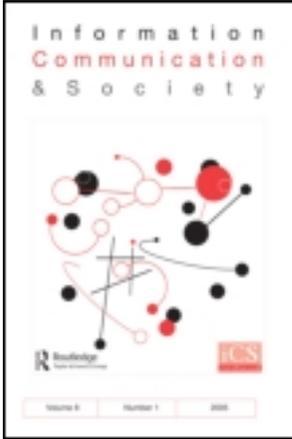
This article was downloaded by: [New York University]

On: 05 December 2013, At: 20:36

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Information, Communication & Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rics20>

LIFE ON THE WIRE

André Brock ^a

^a University of Iowa , 3074 Main Library, Iowa City, IA, 52242-1420, USA

Published online: 09 Mar 2011.

To cite this article: André Brock (2009) LIFE ON THE WIRE, *Information, Communication & Society*, 12:3, 344-363, DOI: [10.1080/13691180802660628](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180802660628)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691180802660628>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly

forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

André Brock

LIFE ON THE WIRE

Deconstructing race on the Internet

This paper focuses on the construction of racial identity online through the mediating influences of popular culture, old media, weblogs, and Internet users. This paper examines the production of race on the Internet by examining the elements that make up the weblog Freakonomics: the topic, the environment, the medium, and the users. Recent cyberculture research has called for Internet studies to integrate critical theories of race and culture into its analyses. The argument, which this paper seeks to extend, is for the increased recognition of the salience of race in understanding Web content and production. In examining the blog's structure, posts, and comments, I applied Omi and Winant's racial formation theory to the cultural representations and structural phenomena articulated with respect to themes of race, racial interactions, media, and geography. Omi and Winant argue that people interpret the meaning of race by framing it in social structures, and that conversely, recognizing the racial dimensions in social structures leads to interpretations of race. Accordingly, this paper examines interpretations of race in The Wire (a critically-acclaimed minority-led television show), the New York Times news website, the Freakonomics blog, and the Web-enabled audience of the three elements. The paper concludes by arguing for more use of critical race and theory in information studies research in order to understand how racial perspectives affect the presentation and interpretation of Internet content.

Keywords Computer-mediated communication; identity; race; cyberculture; media studies

On a newspaper's blog, a sociologist recounts his adventures in watching a television show with a group of criminals. The commenters log in to discuss the show but stay to interact with the criminals. A weblog, on a reputable website run by an old guard media power, opened a discussion about race, culture, and morals through interpretations of a popular television show. At the intersection of audience, old media, new media, and popular culture, I found that an architectural enabling of civil discourse produced nuanced explanations about the production of racial identity in American media and culture.

This article looks at four elements: the *New York Times* website, which through a combination of professional ethos and code, fostered a venue for civil public discussion about race. The television show *The Wire* serves as a topical focus for the third element, the blog *Freakonomics*. In the blog, race was articulated by the fourth element – the commenters and the blogger – in terms mediated by the show as well as by the forum in which the discussions were presented. The four elements: environment, culture, Internet, and audience combined to present an Internet experience that opened up understandings of American race relations.

Freakonomics (freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com), a blog run by the authors of a popular economics text by the same name, features economic analyses of everyday phenomena. The blog posts examined in this article feature discussions of a critically acclaimed television crime drama. The blogger invited his audience to discuss the show with an unusual group of Internet visitors – the ‘Thugs’, a group of African American criminals. These mediated conversations were intended to discuss the veracity and upcoming storylines of the show but often extended into discussions of race, urban neighborhoods, and identity.

Approach

I employed a critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) to analyze the multiple meanings available in online content and activity. CTDA examines Internet phenomena by situating online discourse about cultural artifacts within a sociocultural matrix. In addition, CTDA analyzes interfaces to understand how the Internet’s form and function visually, symbolically, and interactively mediate discourse. I assembled this analytical approach by following Nakamura’s (2006) prescription for cyberculture research. Her argument is that cyberculture studies lacks a theoretical framework for embedding studies of the Internet into the ‘contemporary constellation of racism, globalization, and technoculture’ (p. 30) within which it exists. Nakamura’s solution is to employ critical race and cultural theory to analyze popular Internet objects and the interactions surrounding them.

Dinerstein (2006) contends that technoculture should be understood as a matrix of ‘progress, religion, Whiteness, modernity, masculinity, and the future’ (p. 571). These tropes can be seen as a foundation for Nakamura’s analytical framework. Critical race theory encourages the examination of systemic instantiations of privilege and power. Accordingly, analyses of Web content should acknowledge the cultural perspectives shaping information and use.

This article also draws from James Carey’s (1975) argument that communication technologies should be considered and studied as a representation of shared beliefs that produce, maintain, and transform reality. What Dinerstein and Nakamura add to Carey’s argument is a critical approach to the cultural

influences that shape the uses for which information technologies are deployed. This is the basis of the analytical approach employed in this article.

This article features a critical cultural perspective that addresses issues of race, power, and discrimination in the online texts and the electronic communicative medium that hosts them. Critical discourse analysis and close reading techniques are used to analyze the data, which was drawn from a popular Internet event/interface. This critical analysis considers the cultural influences shaping the online content generated by users, shared between websites, and the beliefs that power both. A complementary technology analysis serves to identify encumbrances and affordances engendered by using the Internet as a medium of social communication. The next sections detail the critical race framework, data, and method employed in this article. Later sections examine the discourses constructed in and by the four elements mentioned earlier, then close with a discussion of the implications of my findings.

Critical race theory and the Web

Racial formation theory is the critical race framework used to understand how identities are constructed and maintained across the four elements. Omi and Winant (1994) lay out racial formation as the process through which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed (p. 55). Race can thus be understood as an identity formed through social structure and cultural representation. Social structures provide the framework in which we represent race and cultural representations illustrate how race is organized in social structures.

In ICTs disseminating American culture, racial formation often operates through exclusion and allusion. The Web presents information for a 'general' audience. In an American context that translates to information devoted to the interests (and fears) of affluent, middle class White men. Women and minorities are constructed as boundaries or objects for this audience (Kvasny 2005; Brock 2007; Lockard 2000; Mitra 1997). As demographics of Web users have changed, the number of Internet properties devoted to the information needs of minority groups has increased as well. However, the hegemonic nature of the Web continues to prioritize information for the mainstream.

Structurally, the Internet is also constrained by values of individualism and articulations of 'color-blind' ideology. For example, while race is more frequently offered today as a category of identification in today's 'social Web', it is rarely acted upon in any way by content providers or websites. When race is a structural option, it is disseminated as a special interest separate from the concerns of 'mainstream' Americans. Consider race as a profile category; how often does the format or content presentation of a website modify once the member selects a race other than White? As an example, consider the multinational Web portal, Yahoo! Compare the North American Yahoo! portals – Canada (ca.yahoo.com),

the US (yahoo.com), and Mexico (mx.yahoo.com). Each portal lays out information similarly. But due to ethnocultural differences, the information presented is organized differently and topically divergent, even on the US and Canadian English-language websites. Cultural meaning – mediated by software code, genre, rules of interaction, and ideology – influences the presentation of online content for providers and audiences.

Data

I analyzed the posts and comments published as the ‘Real Thugs’ series to the *Freakonomics* blog from January 18 to March 10, 2008. In total, nine posts and over 500 comments were sorted and closely read for themes regarding the construction of various identities. Comments that only discussed the show’s plot developments were set aside for later study. The comments that were not specifically about the show were divided into the following topics:

- Impact of race on the show, the characters, the creators, and the blog
- Geographic identity and race
- Race, law, and crime

The comments contain permalinks referencing the time and date posted. No other material on the page was analyzed.

A necessary part of a CTDA analysis includes the contextualization of the show, the blog, the blog’s host, and the multiple audiences. The next sections illustrate this by showing the interactions between those four elements to be understood as a part of a larger matrix of identity formation and maintenance.

Cultural element: *The Wire*

Racial formation theory looks at cultural representations of race in social structures. *The Wire* is a complex representation of the intersection of race, institutions, and geography on urban communities. The show is a police drama set in the American city of Baltimore, Maryland. Its premise revolves around the dysfunctional nature of institutions.

The show provides implicit and explicit contributions to the construction of online racial identity. One implied narrative is the show’s presence in the white-dominated cultural representations of primetime television. Realistic portrayals of American race relations are a rarity. Dramas with mostly African American casts are equally rare. For example, the show’s mostly African American cast reflects Baltimore’s racial demographics. This serves as a counternarrative against shows with all White casts set in cities (e.g., New York’s *Friends*) with large Black populations.

An explicit counternarrative can be seen in the show's portrayal of complex racial identities. Rather than taking refuge in stereotypes, *The Wire* shows a more human side of drug dealers without minimizing the harm that drugs do to urban communities. It balanced this view by showing the amoral (and even criminal) motivations of civic institutions. *The Wire* works as social commentary on the decay of social contracts between communities and the government, using Baltimore as a stand-in for urban America.

The show's aim is mimesis, reproducing accurate 'Bawlmer'¹ dialects and slang, as well as realistic portrayals of police procedure, bureaucracy and crime. The show's dramatic nature – its deliberate pacing, densely packed storylines, thematic approaches to urban life and an intentional avoidance of happy endings endemic to much of American drama – also attempt to recreate the complexity of human existence. The show has an intensely loyal following and critical acclaim, both praising the show's verisimilitude. The show's success at achieving mimesis can be seen later on in this paper, as the commenters use the show's characters to illustrate the effects of race on their own lives.

Internet element: *Freakonomics*, the blog

Among Internet genres, weblogs are uniquely positioned to express identity. They allow personal contributions based on worldview; social engagement through the use of Internet artifacts such as YouTube, Last.fm, and Del.icio.us; and dialogue with their audience as well as with other blogs (trackbacks). Blogs publish content reflective of the author's self in an electronically mediated space (Herring *et al.* 2004; Miller & Shepherd 2004). From this perspective, blog comments serve as relationship management (Schmidt 2007) that reinforces or argues with the original post's worldview, content, or veracity. Blogs can be seen as the discursive construction of identity based upon an assemblage of online information, online dialogue, and personal ideology.

The *Freakonomics* blog started in March 2005 as a promotional vehicle for the book *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explains the Hidden Side of Everything*. The book and the blog are authored by Steven Dubner and Steven Levitt. *Freakonomics* applied economics theory to topics not usually considered by economists. For example, Levitt and Dubner found that most drug dealers work abysmal hours for low wages instead of the glamorous lifestyles shown in movies and television.

The blog continues the book's theme. *Freakonomics* now has several regular contributors in addition to Dubner and Levitt: one is the Columbia sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh. In 2007, the blog began publication on the *New York Times* website, gaining an editor. According to Technorati, the blog is currently ranked 56th in terms of visibility, site visits, and popularity. This may have something to do with its host, as the *New York Times* website is ranked among the 100

most popular websites in the world by Alexa and its blogs are the second most popular destination on the site.

How to characterize the *Freakonomics* blog, with respect to the construction of racial identity? It's an institutionally hosted blog, run by a journalist and an economist. Although personal opinions do surface from time to time – either through specific posts or through short posts consisting of annotated links – the site's main activity is to use academic means (primarily economics-oriented) to understand everyday occurrences. Understanding *Freakonomics* the blog only as an academic exercise, however, sells it short. It should be more properly considered as an alternative inquiry into overlooked phenomena. Thus, the use of the blog to discuss racial themes – which is typically Venkatesh's purview, as the other authors tend to stay away from such topics – can be seen as an institutionally supported online initiative to express critical perspectives on race that are typically unavailable in mainstream spaces.

Sudhir Venkatesh. Venkatesh's contributions to *Freakonomics* draw from his research. His work seeks to understand the networks – economic, social, or political – undergirding urban neighborhoods and as such works well within the blog's ethos of uncovering hidden dimensions in everyday life. He found that urban neighborhoods have surprisingly complex social networks involving barter, governance, political power, and civic control. His ethnographic experiences explain his access to the 'street figures' as well as his acceptance of the Thugs as authorities on crime and police procedure.

Venkatesh's choice to write about *The Wire* can be seen as an homage. The show represents his research subjects and shows them to primetime American audiences in their Byzantine, flawed humanity. The 'Real Thugs' blog posts work to add an additional layer of authenticity to *The Wire* by presenting criminals to the world of the *New York Times* as valued contributors, rather than spectacles for entertainment. As a researcher, Venkatesh is ethically obligated to accurately represent his research subjects. As a blogger/content provider for the *New York Times*, Venkatesh is also bound to honor journalistic ethics of accuracy and fairness. Ironically, the racial identities of the Thugs are validated by their appearance on the *New York Times* website – typically a bastion of Whiteness and American culture. In this way, we can see how the Internet, in its guise as a weblog, works to transform the *Times*' structural formation of racial identity.

Ecological element: the *New York Times* website

The *New York Times* first appeared online in 1995. Alexa ranks the website as the 22nd most visited in the United States. There are two factors to be considered with respect to the *Times*' formation of racial identity. The first is how the site's

ethos shapes its mission of delivering information. The second draws from the first; the ethos of the site, explicitly stated, transforms the discourse between visitors and staff. Both of these factors, when examined from a racial formation framework, show how social structures organize how we understand race.

In an internal handbook titled *Ethical Journalism* (2004), the editors state,

The goal of The *New York Times* is to cover the news as impartially as possible – “without fear or favor,” in the words of Adolph Ochs, our patriarch – and to treat readers, news sources, advertisers and others fairly and openly, and to be seen to be doing so. (p. 3)

The *Times* considers its online incarnation to be subject to the same ethical standards of accuracy and fairness as its print version. Unlike blogs, newspapers possess institutional mechanisms for feedback on whether or not these principles are observed. Given the website’s popularity, it can be argued that the *Times*’ adherence to these principles works well to attract visitors. In this way, we can see how the ethos of an institution can affect the online content it provides.

With respect to discourse between visitors and the *Times* staff, blogs have been a part of the paper’s strategy to embrace the ‘Social Web’. As other sites have discovered, the advent of interactivity between readers and media can be a mixed bag. Conversations between audience and authors promote the possibility of an online public sphere. Unfortunately, unmoderated discourse can quickly degenerate into trolling, obscenity, and worse. For blogs, this can destroy the discursive environment. For a newspaper, this can damage its reputation as a place for objectivity and reasoned discourse. A quick survey of other newspapers’ comment policies reveals a variety of strategies for dealing with uncivil comments. Many of them disallow vitriolic, obscene, or profane discourse but rarely discuss the ways in which those comments are edited.

The *Times*’ strategy for interactivity allows anonymity, sets topical and Internet-mediated standards for discursive civility, and espouses freedom of speech within limits. The site evaluates every comment submitted to the site using a staff of editors and news assistants (Phillips 2007). By submitting a comment, readers tacitly acknowledge compliance with the site’s Member Agreement. In addition to prohibitions against libel, pornography, and copyright infringement, the Agreement asks members to ‘not use language that abuses or discriminates on the basis of race Hate speech of any kind is grounds for immediate and permanent suspension of access’ (Member Agreement, 2007, section 3.2(b)).

Jim Roberts, editor of digital news for the *Times*, elaborated upon the site’s commenting guidelines:

No name calling or insults. I don’t like it when I see the words “idiot” or “moron” or “fascist.” I can be somewhat tolerant of harsh criticism of public officials, but I am super-aggressive in deleting comments in which

other commenters are being attacked And forget about ethnic, racial, religious or sexual slurs. (Phillips 2007)

The site's comments FAQ notes that comments are not edited; if they are not approved they are not published. Moreover, the selection process is done by hand. The *Times* can thus be viewed as a content provider intent on promoting civility and objectivity. Their ethos, as embodied by their comment selection practices, drives the paper's website to maintain civil discursive boundaries for its members and staff.

Social element: *Wire* fans as audience and subject

I was drawn to this topic because of the interactions between the blog and its commenters. Fans of popular culture can be very passionate about their chosen object and will take advantage of opportunities to discuss it online. Occasionally, they will be able to discuss the object in great detail with the creator, or even other associated artists. In the 'Real Thugs' posts, however, the commenters used the show as a framework to understand men who were NOT affiliated with the show in any aspect save one: the Thugs are criminals. Through their interactions with the Thugs (mediated by Venkatesh) the discussions grew to encompass dimensions of racial identity only obliquely referenced in the show.

The 'Real Thugs'. On January 18, 2008 Venkatesh introduced the 'What Do Real Thugs Think of *The Wire*?' series of posts through a framing device – viewing *The Wire* with actual criminals – as a search for validation of the series' portrayal of urban life. Each entry recounted Venkatesh's interactions with the Thugs during the show. As the posts continued, the Thugs developed an awareness of their electronic existence and began to engage their Net-enabled audience by addressing questions to them directly. In one post, the Thugs responded to selected comments and revealed their own racialized identity framework; this will be addressed later in this section.

The name originated from the first post; Venkatesh wrote that the men christened themselves as 'Thugs and Cuz'. Venkatesh notes that all hail from the New York metropolitan area.² He initially highlighted the Thugs' criminal identities through sessions discussing plot developments in the show, but added scattered racial identity cues throughout the series.

The Thugs were introduced in the third paragraph of the January 18 post; Venkatesh wrote,

For the first episode, we gathered in the Harlem apartment of Shine, a 43-year-old half Dominican, half African-American man who managed a gang

for fifteen years before heading to prison for a ten-year drug trafficking sentence. I invited older guys like Shine, most of whom had retired from the drug trade, because they would have greater experience with rogue cops, political toughs, and everyone else that makes *The Wire* so appealing.

The first racial identity formulated in these posts comes courtesy of Venkatesh's framing of the 'American thug'. For example, he reported that the Thugs eat ribs and fried pork rinds, the latter of which is 'apparently the favorite of the American thug' (Venkatesh, January 18 2008). Apart from Shine, no other Thugs were described racially. However, because of the location of the viewing party – Venkatesh watched the show in Harlem³ at Shine's place – and the American media's conflation of 'urban' and 'black' (Entman & Rojecki 2000), the audience was led to understand that the Thugs are Black Americans.

Venkatesh reinforced the Thugs' racial identity with cultural signifiers throughout the posts. He recounted their speech as a variation of African American Vernacular English. For example, Venkatesh quoted Flavor directly, 'But a black man as president? Who! I'm getting out of the game if that happens. Black on Black policing. That's a b–h (sic)' (Venkatesh, February 7, 2008). More frequently, there was redacted profanity (by the Thugs), particularly the word 'nigger'. One commenter picked up on this; 'Stringer Bell' wrote that given Venkatesh's ethnographic experiences, he should be

more cognizant of the semantic difference between the word "n–a" (sic) and "n–r" (sic). One is used respectfully, affectionately, and as a term among blacks. The other is almost always used derogatively and almost always by whites. Yet you seem to mistake what your friends are saying for the other type.

Each Thug was pseudonymized, although Venkatesh never revealed whether this was a self-adopted identity or simply the dovetailing of the academic and journalistic practices of anonymizing research subjects. It was unclear exactly how many 'Thugs' were present for each of the viewings. Venkatesh described them as 'a few respected street figures' (Venkatesh, January 18 2008), but later noted that there were other people present, noting the actions of 'one of the low-ranking members in attendance'.⁴

The Thugs served as an additional racial framework for the commenters to digest and reflect upon. Their presence, mediated by Venkatesh, provided a human side to the racial commentary of *The Wire*. It is often noted in critical race literature that due to geographic segregation, many Whites only know Black people through television. Here we find a situation where the Internet enabled people to understand race better through the commenter's interactions with the Thugs. This was borne out in several comments across the series of posts.

Analysis: ‘What do Real Thugs think of *The Wire*?’

Venkatesh’s blog posts followed *The Wire* episodes chronologically. The posts highlighted the Thugs’ contributions to explaining plot points, instead of rehashing the show. As the posts continued, however, personal stories about the Thugs began to usurp Venkatesh’s retellings of the viewing sessions. As mentioned earlier, I analyzed comments that mentioned the show when responding to the Thugs. These comments are where discussions of race and identity developed.

The commenters quickly jumped upon the possibilities of watching *The Wire* with actual criminals. The minority criminal identity proffered by Venkatesh was, for the most part, accepted. When contested, it was contested along both criminal and racial dimensions. ‘mg’ asked,

why are the comments focusing on the predictions and not focusing on the complete ridiculousness of venkatesh’s narrative. ‘pork rinds, apparently the favorites of the american thug?’ are u serious? indeed, venkatesh is a master at exoticizing poverty and perpetuating stereotypes. we need to begin to start criticizing this man for his racist, highly sensational totally fictionalized analysis of poor people.

‘Mg’ follows this comment up a few days later by clarifying, ‘there’s something wrong about the idea that wow, we’re hearing from the “real deal”, like the real things is criminals – and I see that connected to often to the idea that real black people are criminals’.

Several commenters expressed problems with Venkatesh concerning his perspective and his subjects. They questioned his veracity and ethics as a sociologist and as a journalist. As a sociologist, Venkatesh was criticized for exploiting the Thugs for personal gain. As a journalist, he was accused of fabricating the Thugs’ existence. ‘Sandro’ asked, ‘Is anyone else disturbed by Venkatesh essentializing gang culture?’, while ‘Big G’ wrote:

This man is a liar!

No real gang member or leader would let this man do anything with them.

He trying to pretend that black people are stupid!

you shouldn’t believe nothing he say about Robert Taylor⁵ of any of these things he saying now!!!!

I know real gang leaders and guess what he is lying big time!!!!

Some body need to bust him out by talking to some of those people he so called know in the projects.

Some body need to check his facts or you will end up just like that man who had the million dollar book that lied to Oprah!

As the series closed out, ‘Wes’ noted, ‘If we’re going for reality, why just leave in the highlights? Count me among the skeptics. . . Sudhir is pretty shameless, so nothing would surprise me’. A few commenters went so far as to link Venkatesh’s posts with the show’s ongoing storyline of the Baltimore Sun reporter who was (correctly) accused of fabricating details for a story. ‘Jay B’ wrote, ‘Sudhir, you’d do all us skeptics a service by posting a photo of the thug Wire roundtable. Even if you have to obscure the faces to protect their identities, it would demarcate the line between fact and fiction. I’m calling your bluff on this and I know others are as well.’

Here we can see the possibilities of the *New York Times*’ mediating influence upon the discourse. Venkatesh was regarded as a journalist by some commenters rather than only a blogger, perhaps because he posts content to the *New York Times* website. The ethos of the *Times* was used as a qualifier for evaluating Venkatesh’s authenticity. This ethically frames Venkatesh’s blog posts in a way that posting on a Blogger hosted weblog does not. Consider this comment by ‘AT’, who compares Venkatesh to disgraced *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair,

Practically every comment above gushes about what “great commentary” this blog gimmick is. Any chance that it’s too “great” to be true? To me, the post reads like a writer writing “real thug” dialogue with the luxuries of doing so in very small doses and never having to reveal the “sources.” Maybe I’m in too cynical a mindset from watching “*The Wire*” (and I certainly don’t have any basis to level an accusation besides my B.S. radar), but this smacks of Jayson Blair and Stephen Glass M.O.

In this era of Photoshop and digital image manipulation, it is unclear how a photo of Black men posing with Venkatesh would necessarily be a credible verification of the Thugs’ actual existence. The audience’s problems with the narrative or the Thugs’ identities were never addressed by Venkatesh. Despite the criticism, however, the ‘Thugs’ entries engendered a very positive response from the comments section.

Thugs, Blogs, Newspapers, and Race

In Part Four (January 31, 2008), Venkatesh informed his audience that the Thugs were interested in interacting with them. In an exchange between ‘Shine’ and Venkatesh in Part Four, Venkatesh recounts:

Shine turned to me and asked, “Who reads these reports you write?”
 “You mean the blogs?”
 “Yeah, who reads them? I mean, what are the people like? They’re white, right?”

“Well, actually,” I said, “I have no idea. They comment, you know; they react to what I write, but I’ve never met any of them.”

“They’re white,” Flavor said, dismissively. “But I’m with Shine, I’d like to know what they think.”

Here we can see another piece of the construction of racial identity; the association of Whiteness with *New York Times* readers. Their request drew identity-driven responses from the commenters. The Thugs challenged the readers to correctly predict who would kill whom first: the power hungry drug lord or his rival, a Robin-hood type. This post had the most comments of the entire series, due in no small part to the popularity of the characters, but also because the commenters enthusiastically identified themselves racially in an online space where previously there was no need to do so. In addition, several readers added geographic identity qualifiers.

Racial responses to the query in Part Four varied. Without explicitly declaring his own racial identity, ‘Greg’ speculated,

As for who reads the blog, I imagine fans of *Freakonomics* and *The Wire* . . . which in demographic terms, means elite college grads. While elite colleges pride themselves on diversity, from an ethnical-cultural standpoint, they are “white,” (as opposed to black, asian, or hispanic). So, I would agree with Flavor.

‘Slangdini’ partially confirmed ‘Greg’s’ analysis, writing, ‘Let the boys know, black folks read this too (although I’m a professor)’. ‘Geeks Not Freaks’ wrote ‘Here’s the ultimate white/Geekonomic response to your query’. ‘Vee Cel’ addressed Shine directly, writing ‘Shine, smarten up understand (sic) that whites are not the only people that are reading this’.

After posting his opinion on the impending showdown, ‘that-dude’ posted again immediately to say ‘BTW, I’m African-American’. ‘portorikan’ added, ‘I’m Puerto Rican for the census record’, and ‘Sleepy’ began his comments with ‘I’m Asian-American’ then continuing to say, ‘I also like reading and “hearing” the speech of the gang members, because the rhythm and the language is authentic. Honestly, I also think I would be scared (but try not to show it) to hang out with these guys. Especially because my only exposure to the gang mentality is through rap music’. Finally, ‘Blue Moe’ wrote a lengthy comment about the show, beginning with ‘I’m an American Negro. And tell those guys that these days Negroes are reading the Times, and other things as well, with regularity, not just the white folk. Some of us have come a long way; some of us have not’.

The Thugs’ casual labeling of the blog readers as White (and implicitly male) also encouraged female commenters to identify themselves; ‘Marian’ wrote, ‘To answer one of your source’s questions – I am Black and female. So all of the

readers are not white'. Another Black woman, 'Danielle', wrote 'For the record I'm also Black and female. It's not just white people who read the *New York Times* and its website, tell your new viewing partners to open their minds a little bit'. 'Wire Watcher' added, 'For the record, Black female here'. 'mama' chimed in, beginning her comment with 'Female, white, baby boomer', while 'Nan's' comment began by stating, 'From a suburban Asian woman'. It is clear here that although neither the Thugs nor Venkatesh cited gender as a concern, these commenters picked up on the implicit assumption that Internet users are male and spoke up to indicate their participation in the male world of the Wire, of the Web, and of *New York Times* readers as well.

Geography and race

Geography and race mutually constituted identity in several responses. 'Bay' wrote, 'Oh and I am white yes but have lived in inner city Baltimore not far actually from where they film much of this for 20 odd years'. 'Lilly' wrote, 'White, writing from Baltimore'. 'Dennis' described himself in detail: 'Asian male, 5'8, 150 lb., black hair, brown eyes, last known alias. . . Oh wait, too much info? Anyway, I lived in Bawlmer (sic) for a few years (that's right, I know how it's pronounced)'. Pronunciation (and the correct spelling) of Baltimore as 'Bawlmer' served to identify more invested residents; 'Donny' wrote 'For the record, I'm white, and live in Balmer (sic)'.

Other geographic and racial identities were revealed in the comments as well. 'Dan' added, 'Flavor – I'm white. First off, I could try to look smart and use what I've learned in my limited ghetto experience growing up around 9-mile outside of Detroit to answer your question. Honestly, it'd be luck if I got it right'. 'Shan' wrote, 'I'm indian (sic), never lived in the inner city, but look at *The Wire* as the most realistic depiction of people I've seen'. 'Frank Sobotka' (a reference to a White character from *The Wire*) followed up his response to the Thugs' query by writing 'And I'm white and from the burbs'.⁶ 'Mike' added, 'Thoughts from a white guy in Sacramento', and another California representative, 'Tim' wrote in to say 'I am White myself, but I grew up in Oakland'. 'Tim's' mention of Oakland serves to demarcate the commenters' awareness of the conjoining of urban and Black identities. Oakland, California is directly connected to San Francisco by the Golden Gate Bridge, but unlike San Francisco is much more heavily populated by Blacks and people of Latina/o descent.

'Will the REAL Black man stand up?'

In Part Seven (February 22, 2008), the Thugs responded to the comments posted to Part Four. The Thugs were more interested in responding to speculations

about the show instead of to those marking race. Venkatesh summarized their reactions to the comments in list form. The only response the Thugs had to the racial identities revealed in the comments was to 'Blue Moe's' comment. Venkatesh reported:

4. "Will the Real Black Man Stand Up?"

Yo, Blue Moe!" "Tony-T", one of the Thugs, shouted out "Yeah, we believe you when you say you're a Negro. Because no self-respecting black man would feel good about reading the *New York Times*. I got something for you: its called the Amsterdam News.⁷ Take a look at it, my brother. Its for the real Negroes.

Here Venkatesh and the Thugs contribute to the racial frameworks developed during the 'Thugs' posts.

Venkatesh provided a framework for the Thugs' responses; The Thugs responded to Blue Moe's characterization of himself as an 'American Negro' but do not accept this as an authentic 'self-respecting' Black identity. Reading the *New York Times* is construed as an anti-Black activity, and a more acceptable Black information source – New York City's *Amsterdam News* – is offered in its stead. The endorsement reflects the Thugs' awareness of how Black periodicals more directly serve the information needs of the Black community. It is too facile to dismiss Tony-T's comment as anti-intellectualism, as one of the commenters did. 'John-Paul Pagano' wrote, 'Yo Tony T, maybe it's the attitude you express in "Will the Real Black Man Stand Up?" (#4) that explains why Orlando feels there is no future in the hood. Racially driven anti-intellectualism helps keep you down'.

Crime and Race

Because of the topical influences of the Thugs and of the show's subject matter, criminal identity was an oft-visited topic. 'farsidekidoo' offered a theoretical perspective on crime and race, noting that, 'not everyone who deals in weight is black or lives in the inner city. it actually tends to be white people living in the suburbs. but of course this is all speculation. -a white kid'. 'Farsidekidoo's' observation segues to another set of online identity formations.

'If the Gangs were White...?'

In Part Seven, the Thugs expanded the ongoing explorations into identity from race to criminal identities originating from race. The Thugs asked the commenters: 'If the gangs were white, what would be different about the show?' Part Seven's comments reveal connections between criminality, race, and American

culture. *The Wire*, although groundbreaking in its efforts to humanize criminals, nevertheless employs racial stereotypes. Freed from these constrictions by the Thugs' question, the comments reveal an online construction of a White American identity. For example, some commenters transposed White criminal activity from the street to the boardroom. 'elhondo' wrote, 'The white wire – only thing that comes to mind is Wall Street', while 'Ricck Ross'⁸ wrote, 'If the gangs were white, they'd be called Enron and Arthur Anderson'.

Others used historical perspectives to point out that crime was one way for white ethnics to gain social standing. 'BK Ray' argued,

If the gangs were white the show would be different because it would be in the twenties, and people would be smuggling alcohol. Other than that, not so different. You have to realize that gangs are really part of the immigrant experience.

'Davey' made a similar observation, writing, 'If the gangs were white, they'd all tie sweaters around their necks, drink scotch and whale on each other with tennis racquets or golf clubs'. 'mannyv' argued, 'Historically, ethnic white gangs have been about protecting the group while aiming towards "respectability" within society. Basically, with white gangs there's a way out. That makes the potential long-term behavior different'. 'Sean' added,

Depends on what type of whites you mean. For instance white eastern europeans. . . would be even more ruthless and less emotional than the gangsters we see in season 5. . . Eastern europeans come from a history of suffering and poverty as bad if not worse than recent history of black americans. If your (sic) talking white american kids then the season would be more comical watching the white boys talk and dress as they see black drug dealers without having any of the authenticity. Also westernised white gangsters would fail to be as ruthless and would ultimately (sic) be moved out by another race group once the profit margins became worth killing for.

Several commenters linked geography, Whiteness, and crime. 'alex' wrote, 'If the gangs were white, they would be called the Hells Angles (sic), the Pagans, Banditos or Outlaws MC. The drugs would be Marijuana, Methamphetamine and MDMA and the setting would be more rural'. 'matt casper' wrote,

If the gangs were white. . . well, the show would have to be set somewhere in the midwest instead of the inner city. I think the crime would be more random, too, as the white gangs from these midwest towns would be comprised primarily of drug users, who are pretty random people.

These comments position crime as a low status endeavor for poor rural Whites. Whites use methamphetamine instead of ‘urban’ drugs such as crack cocaine. Although *The Wire* does show white drug users and dealers, the show’s racial framework did not encourage the commenters to expand its criminal and drug addict characterizations to urban Whites or suburban minorities.

Connections between language and race were also made within this criminal framework. In an exchange between two commenters, ‘Whitey Bulger’ argued that in a show about White gangs, there would be less profanity. He went on to add his opinion about Black identity and language,

How come the blacks don’t tell the TV producers to lighten up on the language and violence? In the end it makes all blacks look bad, including the Massachusetts governor, Deval Patrick, and the presidential candidate, Barack Obama. . . . I can just imagine Obama talking about going head to head with all those m**** f***** in Congress.

‘Paula Godley-Mack’ retorted,

I suspect and know that Caucasians on a lower economic level, living in their version of the ghettos called trailer parks, speak and behave in ways that Caucasians (and African-Americans) on a higher income level and education do not. . . . Just as there are all types of Caucasians, there are just as many types of African-Americans.

Whites were inconsistently portrayed with respect to moral authority. ‘DanC’ felt that White criminals would ‘[commit] less impulse violence, more mobile in different communities, more front businesses, fewer underlings but more loyalty, more family ties, try to pass for regular community members’. Here we see values of civility, enterprise, kinship, and normality marked as inherent in Whiteness. Conversely, ‘George’ opined, ‘Personally I think white people can be crazier, just look at these school shootings and lil white boys killing their parents or eating them. You never hear about that in the ghetto’. ‘Concerned’ asserted a middle ground, writing,

90% of these posts are about how horrific white people are. First of all, I don’t care if you’re white or black, but being white, or even working on wall street or being a member of congress, does not automatically constitute being evil, as cool as such populist statements may be.

Finally, one commenter recounted his experience as a White criminal. ‘Oh No’ wrote that Whiteness adds certain advantages, ‘A white boy in the hood always carries it differently. There’s a certain, dare I say, swagger, in knowin’ that . . . even in the ghetto, that a white boy still has more “hope” than the other’s’.

Discussion

Authenticity is the discursive engine driving the blog posts, the comments, and the website itself. *The Wire*'s realism may have inspired Venkatesh to establish the series' verisimilitude by recruiting the Thugs to evaluate the show. The dialogue between the blogger and the Thugs, the interrogations of the Thugs by the commenters, and the Thugs' challenges to the commenters all worked to determine the line between fact and fiction in the show. Moreover, the website hosting these discussions has a publicly stated ethos of authenticity in practice and in information. The *Times*' policy of controlling discourse encouraged civil interactions between commenters, while the paper's ethos of accurately and honestly presenting information encouraged the commenters to demand authenticity from the Thugs and from Venkatesh. Authenticity also influenced the production of racial identity. The online identities here were established through the recounting of offline lives. The commenters could have discussed the show without touching upon their own personal issues regarding race in the United States.

In other Internet venues identities are established through multiple, consistent interactions between group members over time. In this series of posts, however, the only participants who had identities established in such a manner were the Thugs. In the comments, there was little chance for multiple interactions between entities over time. Rather than establishing an online identity through extended interactions with other commenters, the commenters responded to the Thugs' challenge regarding online racial identity and then rarely appeared again.

This can be traced to the lack of threaded comments on the *Freakonomics* blog. Typically, comments are posted chronologically; to refer to a previous comment, commenters refer to that commenter by name or by comment number. This can be overcome by threading, a discursive mechanism allowing nested replies to comments posted underneath the original statement. Thus, commenters can address a previous comment directly instead of being separated by other, possibly off-topic discursive threads. Threading leads to longer conversations between commenters, which satisfies the condition of interactions-over-time and contributes to the composition of online identity (Kollock & Smith 1998; Herring 1999; Nonnecke & Preece 2003).

Instead, the commenters created their identities in response to the discussions between Venkatesh and the Thugs about the show. In the posts, Venkatesh and the Thugs created and complicated the Thugs' identities as Black American criminals, using dimensions of racial identity including literacy, language, food, information literacy, and geography. The commenters drew upon these dimensions to construct their own racialized identities. Venkatesh, *The Wire*, and the commenters together created possibilities for humanizing the Thugs, and in the process created complex articulations of race online through the lens of criminal activity.

I want to briefly return to Omi and Winant's racial formation theory. The commenters' formulation of online racial identities highlights their understanding of how race operates in particular institutional settings – especially with regard to the comments about race and crime. Redefining race from a minority identity to one that is either practiced by White elites or White rural degenerates shows an understanding that differential access to institutions is a part of racial identity. Omi and Winant's theory, then, not only applies to cultural objects such as *The Wire* but also to the interactions that allow its audience to understand the show. Thus, racial formation theory can be used to understand online interactions around cultural objects quite well.

As America prepares for the inauguration of its first African American president, conversations about race will fill an ever growing number of websites. Many unsuspecting bloggers have learned that race talk attracts the worst sort of discursive behavior. Those who have not resigned from the Internet, wearied by the constant attacks, employ discursive and electronic controls to maintain and encourage civil interactions. Mainstream websites must follow suit proactively. American cultural perceptions of race and racial behaviors can destroy online discourse and inhibit interactivity, unless a conscious effort is made on the part of the website owner. Doing so indicates the presence of an online ethos of democracy and justice and hints towards a truly public sphere.

Notes

- 1 Dialect for Baltimore.
- 2 The geographic area spanning the intersection of the states of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.
- 3 A majority Black/Latino neighborhood in Upper Manhattan.
- 4 Venkatesh, Jan 18.
- 5 Reference to Chicago housing project where SV conducted his ethnographic research.
- 6 Frank Sobotka Jan 31 6:27 pm.
- 7 The *Amsterdam News* is a Black-owned periodical and one of the longest-running Black newspapers in the country.
- 8 Rick Ross is the name of a notorious Miami drug kingpin (and popular rapper).

References

- Brock, A. (2007) *Race, the Internet, and the Hurricane: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Black Identity Online During the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina*, PhD dissertation, Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign.

- Carey, J. W. (1975) [1992] 'A cultural approach to communication', in *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, ed. J. W. Carey, Routledge, New York, pp. 13–36.
- Dinerstein, J. (2006) 'Technology and its discontents: on the verge of the posthuman', *American Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 3, pp. 569–595.
- Dubner, S. & Levitt, S. D. (2005) *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, William Morrow & Co, New York.
- Entman, R. & Rojecki, A. (2000) *Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Herring, S. C. (1999) 'Interactional coherence in CMC', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 4, no. 4, [online] Available at: <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol4/issue4/> (21 March 2002).
- Herring, S. C., Scheidt, L. A., Bonus, S. & Wright, E. (2004) 'Bridging the gap: a genre analysis of weblogs', in *Proceedings of the 37th Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS-37)*, IEEE Computer Society Press, Los Alamitos, CA [online] Available at: <http://www.blogninja.com/DDGDD04.doc> (18 April 2008).
- Kollock, P. & Smith, M. (1998) *Communities in Cyberspace*, Routledge, New York.
- Kvasny, L. (2005) 'The role of the habitus in shaping discourses about the digital divide', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 10, no. 2, article 5, [online] Available at: <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue2/kvasny.html> (12 December 2006).
- Lockard, J. (2000) 'Babel machines and electronic universalism', in *Race in Cyberspace*, eds B. E. Kolko, G. B. Rodman & L. Nakamura, Routledge, New York, pp. 171–190.
- Member Agreement (2007, November 30) *The New York Times*, [online] Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/help/agree.html> (3 March 2008).
- Miller, C. & Shepherd, D. (2004) 'Blogging as social action: a genre analysis of the weblog', in *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs*, eds L. J. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff, J. Reyman, [online] Available at: http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/bloggging_as_social_action_a_genre_analysis_of_the_weblog.html (13 August 2008).
- Mitra, A. (1997) 'Virtual commonality: looking for India on the Internet', in *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. S. Jones, Sage, London, pp. 55–80.
- Nakamura, L. (2006) 'Cultural difference, theory, and cyberculture studies: a case of mutual repulsion', in *Critical Cyberculture Studies*, eds D. Silver & A. Massanari, NYU Press, New York, pp. 29–36.
- New York Times Corporation (2004) *NYT Ethics in Journalism 07*, [online] Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/pdf/nyt_ethical_journalism_0904.pdf (14 April 2008).

- Nonnecke, B. & Preece, J. (2003) 'Silent participants: getting to know lurkers better', in *From Usenet to CoWebs: Interacting with Social Information Spaces*, eds C. Leug & D. Fisher, Springer-Verlag, Amsterdam, pp. 110–132
- Omi, M. & Winant, H. (1994) *Racial Formation in the United States*, Routledge, New York.
- Phillips, K. (2007, June 27) 'Caucus chatter', *New York Times*, [online] Available at: <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/08/24/caucus-chatter-3/> (14 April 2008).
- Schmidt, J. (2007) 'Blogging practices: an analytical framework', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 1409–1427.

André Brock Assistant Professor of Library and Information Science/Project on the Rhetoric of Inquiry, University of Iowa. *Address:* 3074 Main Library, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242-1420, USA. [email: andre-brock@uiowa.edu]
