The Racial Divide? African American College Students: Mitigating Digital Culture in Search of Social Justice and Social Change

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Abstract

The most important development in terms of internet users between 2000 and 2005 was the radical increase in the number of women, ethnic, and racial minorities online. According to Nakamura (2002), in the early years of the internet's massification, cyberculture scholars discussed online usage focusing on representations produced by white users and audiences. Marginal references were made to online media produced by African Americans, Asians, or Latinos (Nakamura, 2002). Notably, when the personal computer revolution began, African Americans were much less likely to use the new technology. Demographic studies on internet use emphasize the position of African Americans as consumers and active users of a variety of digital platforms (Correa, Hinsley & Gil de Zuniga, 2010; Duggan & Brenner, 2013). In particular, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat are platforms of web and mobile-based technology that enable consumers to turn communication into interactive conversation. Today, as mobile technology puts computers in our pockets, African Americans are more likely than the general population to access the internet.
Many research studies suggest that minorities are more or less consumers of commodities and entertainment rather than producers or actively engaged audiences. Nevertheless, these surveys of access, race, and the new "digital divide" that fail to measure digital production in favor of measuring access or consumption, cannot tell the whole story. An important consideration is that social media platforms allow users to organize, network and share what they are passionate about in a way that was not available to college student protestors in more radical eras of this decade. Thus, this research study aims to explore the ways in which African American college students use the internet, social media, and mobile technology as sites of activism and resistance.

This study will visually document the level of internet/social media usage, the propensity and style of internet user-created content, as well as its effect on cultural and social capital for a select group of African American college students. The project will gather visual data (videotaped interviews, focus groups and cyberspace photo mapping) on students who are engaging in content creation (e.g., developing websites, posting music, images and videos, managing and contributing to list serves, or adding content to other textual sites) as a way to participate in social and political causes. Through these techniques, the researchers hope to demonstrate how students are not only active consumers of the internet and social media, but also content producers and creators in a quest for social justice and social change.

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