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Preface

This essay can be seen, in its essence, as a response to my concerns regarding a certain way of doing moral and political philosophy. I am referring to what is usually called "ideal theory," a methodology which emphasizes the need to study idealized situations before we can study the non-ideal for the purposes of drawing normative conclusions. Given that real life (or as Netizens call it, 'RL') is in fact quite far from being ideal, the worry is that this method may obfuscate reality rather than clarify it, and therefore give us normative judgments that are unsuitable for the world we live in. I especially fear that abstracting away from different forms of social oppression may in fact reinforce them, rather than help our struggle for a better world. So my concerns can be seen as having two sides: one epistemological, about how ideal theory could give a wrong picture of social reality, and one unapologetically political, about how ideal theory might make it harder for us to address the social and political problems facing us today. In doing so, I follow a long tradition of critical philosophy, famously defined by Karl Marx as "the self-clarification . . . to be gained by the present time of its struggles and desires."[*]

I will follow a form of the method I am trying to defend: setting the actual as the starting point of the critique, or "ascend[ing] from earth to heaven" rather than "descend[ing] from heaven to earth."[†] Thus, in my study of the Internet, I will not begin by assuming an idealized version of it, in which the Internet is a libertarian paradise, a realization of our democratic ideals, or the hope of a brighter future, as many before me have done. This current finds its most pompous expression in John Perry Barlow's "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," where he declared, in the midst of other similarly grandiose prose, that "we are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth."[‡] While he may be right that the Internet as a sphere of discourse in some sense abstracts away from many social realities, it is not clear to me that this is a

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[*] Karl Marx. "Letters from the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*" (1843), in *Early Works 1835-1844*, vol. 3 of *The Collected Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*. (New York: International Publishers, 1974), 146.

[†] Karl Marx. "The German Ideology: Critique of Modern German Philosophy" (1845-1846), in *General Works 1844-1895*, vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*. (New York: International Publishers, 1974), 37.

[‡] John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," in *Crypto Anarchy, Cyberstates, and Pirate Utopias*, ed. Peter Ludlow (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 29.

necessarily positive development. Instead of providing a space in which people of all backgrounds can come together in free debate, race, class, and gender still shape interactions on the Internet, in ways often invisible to its users. The main thrust of this essay will be to offer an understanding of how race in particular shapes online discussion and the online experience despite its invisibility, and to use these insights to help us understand the role that race plays in our discourse more generally. I will not speak much of the way the Internet affects our non-virtual society, but given that an ever-increasing part of our lives is spent online, the study of the Internet in itself is certainly a worthy undertaking.

In our times of 'color-blind' ideas coupled with an ever-increasing gap in the material realities of whites and people of color, I hope this essay can contribute to our struggle to make *reality* color-blind.

Introduction

> There is no race. There are no genders. There is no age. There are no infirmities. There are only minds. Utopia? No. The Internet.
>
> —MCI advertisement, "Anthem." 1994.

To any progressive regular of various online fora,[1] the above epigraph sounds hopelessly out of touch with reality. Some might even be inclined to say that the opposite is the case: There is no place more racist, more sexist than the Internet.[2] Nowhere are we more trapped in our bodies than on the web.[3] The early promise of the Internet as a harbinger of democracy and equality was never realized, and instead, 'cyberspace' is riddled with all the same contradictions of 'meatspace.' In this essay I will analyze why this might be the case, focusing most of my attention on the question of racism. I shall argue that MCI's advertisement is actually closer to the truth than it may seem—not in the Utopian sense intended, but in the sense that race, gender, and other forms of difference are *invisible* on the Internet. Further, I will argue that it is precisely this invisibility which makes racism and sexism more apparent on the Internet than IRL (In Real Life). In the final chapter, I intend to use the results of my investigation to point towards potential solutions to the "problem of the color line" on the Internet.

In order to do this I will conceptualize the Internet as a kind of public sphere, drawing inspiration from the work of Jürgen Habermas. In particular, I will adopt a modified version of his early formulation in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.[4] There he defines

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1   Here I am using the broad definition of a forum as any public place for open discussion, not specifically the message board format that is usually called an 'Internet forum.'

2   For example, Tony Manfred claims: "The Internet is overflowing with overt, savage, relentless racism . . . the real world isn't like that." Tony Manfred, "Why is the Internet so racist?," *Business Insider*. Last modified May 24, 2012. http://www.businessinsider.com/internet-racism-2012-5. Similarly, Jessica Valenti observes: "Extreme instances of stalking, death threats and hate speech are now prevalent, as well as all the everyday harassment that women have traditionally faced in the outside world." Jessica Valenti, "How the web became a sexists' paradise," *The Guardian*. Last modified April 5, 2007. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/apr/06/gender.blogging.

3   Echoing Frantz Fanon: "The Black, at certain moments, is trapped in his body" (translated by the author). Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), PDF e-book, "En guise de conclusion."

4   Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1991). For his later treatment of the question, I will also reference Jürgen Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, vol. 1 of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), PDF e-book; Jürgen Habermas,

the bourgeois public sphere [*bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*], in brief, as "the sphere of private people come together as a public . . . [via the medium of] people's public use of their reason."[5] This characterization of the Internet as a public sphere is neither new nor controversial.[6]

However, for this to be feasible, I will need to narrow which portions of the Internet are subject to my analysis. For example, it is quite obvious that digital banking services do not fall under this definition. Thus I will focus primarily on what Howard Rheingold has termed a 'virtual communities': "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on . . . public discussions . . . with sufficient human feeling . . . to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace."[7] Paradigmatic examples include The WELL, MUDs, IRC, and reddit.[8] Given my focus on the Internet as public sphere, I will pay little attention to the 'human feeling' and 'personal relationship' aspects of the virtual community, devoting most of my thoughts to the aspect of public discussion. I will occasionally also take examples from sites that cannot be easily characterized as either public spheres or virtual communities when taken as a whole, but that contain portions that do fit both definitions. This category includes social media sites such as Myspace and Facebook, where many discussions are aimed at a private network of 'friends' rather than the larger public, but which contain services meant to provide space for

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Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason, vol. 2 of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), PDF e-book.

5 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 27.

6 It is used, for example, in Mark Poster, "Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the public sphere," in *Internet culture*, ed. David Porter (New York: Routledge, 1996): 201-18; Lincoln Dahlberg, "The Internet and democratic discourse: Exploring the prospects of online deliberative forums extending the public sphere," *Information, Communication & Society* 4, no. 4 (2001): 615-633; Antje Gimmler, "Deliberative democracy, the public sphere and the internet," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 27, no. 4 (2001): 21-39; Peter Dahlgren, "The Internet, public spheres, and political communication: Dispersion and deliberation." *Political Communication* 22, no. 2 (2005): 147-162; Hubert Dreyfus, *On the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Felicia Song, *Virtual communities: bowling alone, online together* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009). Zizi Papacharissi argues that it is not a public sphere, but only because it does not satisfy the conception of public sphere as idealized in Zizi Papacharissi, "The virtual sphere: The internet as a public sphere," *New Media & Society* 4, no. 1 (2002): 9-27.

7 Howard Rheingold. *The Virtual Community* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1993), 5.

8 Of all these communities, the only one I will reference at length is reddit, a social news aggregator with comments pages which allows users to create their own communities. The WELL is mostly known for its online fora, in which users can converse by posting messages to a conversation 'thread.' MUDs, or Multi-User Dungeons, are largely text-based virtual worlds, a combination of role-playing games and online chat. IRC, or Internet Relay Chat, is the group chat technology par excellence. It allows various users connected to a 'channel' to converse in real time.

more public discussions (e.g. 'groups' and 'pages' in the Facebook case). At the broadest, then, I will be analyzing any online space in which social interactions take place. When I use the words 'Internet,' 'cyberspace,' and other near-synonyms, it should be assumed that this is what I mean, unless I explicitly say otherwise.

Due to some shortcomings of Habermas' version of the public sphere, I will also be making extensive use of Nancy Fraser's feminist critiques of Habermas. In particular, I will be drawing from two of her essays: "What's Critical About Critical Theory?"[9] and "Rethinking the Public Sphere."[10] From the first I will build on the thesis that certain roles in society are 'gendered,' so that "the citizen role in male-dominated classical capitalism is a masculine role."[11] I will add: the citizen role is also raced. Hence I will argue that the role of the 'Netizen'—the citizen of the virtual public sphere, when conceived as a totalizing unity—is a white role. I will also employ her reading of the later Habermas to help me propose democratic solutions to our virtual problems. From the second I draw on versions of all four of her main critiques of Habermas' public sphere, which I will cite as needed.

Throughout my paper, I will be working with a constructivist theory of race, as defined by Charles Mills: "a view of race as both real and unreal, not 'realist' but still objectivist."[12] I will assume race to have "an objective ontological status . . . which arises out of *intersubjectivity*."[13] I will use the materialist[14] version of constructivism, which will see race and racism as grounded in differences in the material realities of people. Not, of course, their biological material realities, as in essentialist theories of race, but their historically placed socio-economic material realities.

I will divide this paper into three sections. In the first I will make the case that the

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9   Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical About Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," in *Feminists Read Habermas*, ed. by Johanna Meehan (New York: Routledge, 1995), 21-55.

10 Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 109-142.

11 Fraser, "What's Critical About Critical Theory?," 34.

12 Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 47.

13 Ibid., 48.

14 Ibid.

Internet is a public sphere in which race is invisible, and that this allows whites to dominate the larger public sphere in various ways. I will speak at length of the various ways in which the ideal of a unified public sphere contributes to this domination. In the second, I will turn to the experience of individuals of the Net, and I will make the case that the role of the Netizen is a raced role, and that spaces for online discussion are also raced. I will use this discussion to point towards deeper, ontological forms of exclusion from online participation. Finally in the third section I will outline some ways in which white hegemony over the virtual public sphere can be combated, using Fraser's version of Gramscian counter-hegemonic strategies. I end with a conclusion which briefly restates my main theses.

1. White Dominated Publics

On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog.

—Peter Steiner, *New Yorker*, July 5, 1993

I begin by formally laying down some categories that I am adopting from Habermas and Fraser, though modified to apply to the Internet as it exists today, and streamlined to satisfy the needs of my analysis. I consider all of these categories to be specific to the Internet as it exists today, and not transhistorical components of the Internet itself. Given the rate of change of the web, it is quite possible that my analysis will cease to be useful in the near future. However, as these categories have existed in one form or another for decades, I hope that at least some of it will stand the test of time.

a) Intimate sphere: Habermas calls the "intimate sphere [*Intimsphäre*]" the private sphere associated with the conjugal family.[15] Fraser rightfully criticizes this distinction for excluding the problems of the male-dominated family from public debate.[16] In this essay, however, I will be using 'intimate sphere' in a different sense, hopefully one that is less problematic than Habermas'. 'Intimate sphere' will refer to each individual's circle of 'friends,' in the sense popularized by Facebook. That is, any individual with whom one intentionally chooses to interact on a semi-regular basis will be considered a member of one's intimate sphere, or 'circle of friends.' Note that this means a *single* choice to interact with this person in the future, and the word interaction is meant to evoke a reciprocal relationship. I do not include here people whom one needs to intentionally seek out every time one wishes to talk to them, but people whose words may be immediately visible after logging into any particular website, without any further action from the user. Thus in the paradigmatic case of Facebook, one's intimate sphere would be her full list of 'friends,' but would not include people she interacts with in Facebook groups, pages she 'likes,' or celebrities she is 'subscribed' to. Her intimate sphere may include people she knows IRL, but it may also include people she only knows through the Internet. I will not directly analyze the intimate sphere in this paper, but I may use it to contrast it

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15 Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 28.

16 Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 131.

with other spheres of online social interactions.

b) Total public sphere: This type is analogous to Habermas' bourgeois public sphere, as defined earlier. A total public sphere is one which is supposed to be *the* public sphere of discussion, where all individuals can participate as equals, and in which matters that concern everyone are discussed. That is, all public discussion can, at least in principle, be contained in a single, 'total' public sphere. I call it total instead of bourgeois to highlight the aspect I will later be criticizing, i.e. its claim to represent all of society.[17] Habermas identifies three key features of the bourgeois public sphere which I will adopt as defining features of total public spheres:

i. "[T]hey preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether."[18] That is, while individuals participating in the total public sphere may stand in various relations of domination and subordination in their societies, these inequalities are bracketed while they participate in public debate.

ii. The issues debated are of "common concern" as defined by the participants (which, Habermas grants, was a significantly expanded definition from the one allowed before the advent of the bourgeois public sphere).[19]

iii. Finally, the bourgeois public sphere is "in principle inclusive . . . however exclusive the public might be in any given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique."[20] That is, even if not in practice, the total public sphere is meant to be inclusive of every person.

There are two faces to the total public sphere: one normative, one descriptive. The first holds up this type of public sphere as an ideal, and aims to realize it. The second claims it is

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17 Another reason why I eschew the term 'bourgeois' is because it might be misunderstood to mean bourgeois in the Marxist sense, i.e. bourgeois as owners of the means of production. As McCarthy clarifies in his Translator's Note, *bürgerlich* can mean bourgeois in the Marxist sense, but also civil, civic, or middle class. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, xv. In "The Jewish Question," from which I am also drawing, Marx uses bourgeois to mean a member of civil society, in contrast with *citoyen*, which refers to an individual with political rights. Karl Marx. "On the Jewish Question" (1843), *Early Works 1835-1844*, vol. 3 of *The Collected Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*. (New York: International Publishers, 1974), 155.

18 Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 36.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 37.

representative of reality.

The example I draw from here will be reddit, a US-based website which self-consciously bills itself as "the front page of the internet."[21] reddit is a social news website which allows users to create their own communities (called 'subreddits') and submit text or links to other websites to them. Users can vote on which 'posts'[22] they like, and the most liked rush to the top of the page. Positive votes are called 'upvotes,' negative votes are called 'downvotes.' Users can also comment on each post, and a similar voting system decants the most liked comments to the top.[23] See the Illustrations section at the end for a more visual explanation of how the site works.

Following Fraser, however, I will be arguing here that total public spheres cannot deliver their promise of democratic equality. Instead, I will show how asking members of a stratified society to participate together in discussion "as if" they were equal in a single, total sphere, serves only to reinforce inequality and to silence the voices of the subordinated. I will focus on the subordination of Blacks and the domination of whites in the United States, but I believe the broader lines of my argument should serve equally for the criticism many other forms of subordination. But before continuing, let me define two more types of spheres.

c) Partial public sphere: These are not explicitly defined by either Habermas or Fraser, but Habermas at least acknowledges their existence,[24] and Fraser argues strongly in favor of one

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21 Note that here 'internet' is left uncapitalized by reddit administrators. Throughout this essay I use 'Internet' capitalized to make clear that I am referring to the world-wide internetwork.

22 Post as a noun is used to refer to anything published in an online forum, as a verb it is used to refer to the act of publishing anything to an online forum. In the case of reddit, it refers to text or links to other websites.

23 'reddit' can refer both to the technology which allows users to create subreddits, and to the website itself, which also functions as an aggregator of communities. When I characterize reddit as a total public sphere, I am referring of to the second usage, and I will keep this usage throughout the essay. So to be more specific, I will be speaking of reddit's "front page," i.e. the page in which all other communities are aggregated. I will refer to each individual community as a subreddit, and following reddit convention I will shorten reddit.com/r/subreddit to /r/subreddit, so that for example the community dedicated to politics will be referred as /r/politics. A user of reddit is typically called a 'redditor.' I will often speak of reddit if it were cut off from all other forums of discussion of the Net. While interaction between websites does happen, for simplicity's sake I will mainly speak of interactions between individuals and communities within reddit. There are two main ways in which reddit aggregates communities, through its "front page" at reddit.com, which is specific to each registered user, and through reddit.com/r/all (shortened as /r/all), which aggregates all communities. But there is also a set of default sub-reddits (listed at reddit.com/reddits for unregistered users) which is immediately selected for unregistered users, and to which every new user is subscribed, but which can later be changed. I believe /r/all and the default sub-reddits together are the total public sphere in reddit.

24 Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, xviii. He speaks of the "plebeian public sphere" as an example of a

kind of partial public which she calls a subaltern counterpublic. I will define a partial public as a public which rejects at least one of Habermas' three characterizations. That is, these are publics which satisfy at least one of the following conditions, following Fraser:

i. They do not presuppose equality of status, instead, they often bring inequalities to light and explicitly thematize them.[25]

ii. "Common concern" is not defined with respect to what the majority thinks should be common concern, instead, space is given for minorities to make what was once a 'private' concern public.[26]

iii. Finally, partial publics are not necessarily inclusive of everyone, but may be closed to certain groups, or may privilege the voices of certain groups.

Here the examples I draw from will be the various subreddits which satisfy these criteria.

Note that the criteria alone do not make any public 'progressive' or 'reactionary,' the political character of the group will depend on other factors. Thus /r/racism, which is anti-racist, as well as /r/whiterights, which is white supremacist, both satisfy c.i. /r/feminisms, which is feminist, and /r/mensrights, which sees men as the disadvantaged group in society,[27] both satisfy c.ii. A whites-only club and a Black caucus both satisfy c.iii.

c.1) Counterpublic: A counterpublic is a partial public sphere with a *publicist* orientation. That is, a partial public sphere which intentionally wishes to alter the larger public sphere in some way and to enlarge the ranks of its members. Fraser says they function as "spaces of withdrawal and regroupment" as well as "bases and training grounds for agitational activities."[28] They are at the same time spaces in which counter-hegemonic ideas are articulated and where action against the hegemony is organized. The most obvious example here is

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public he will not be speaking of.

25   Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 120.

26   Ibid., 129.

27   /r/mensrights was listed by the SPLC in a report on online misogyny. Souther Poverty Law Center, "Misogyny: The Sites," *Intelligence Report* 145, (2012), accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2012/spring/misogyny-the-sites.

28   Ibid.

/r/agitation, which sees its sole purpose as intervening in larger discussions to argue for radical change against capitalism and the state, but many subreddits all across the political spectrum fit in this category. In reddit, the practice of linking to discussions in other subreddits to alter its shape is called 'brigading,' and the groups that practice it are called 'brigades.'

If we define a counterpublic as necessarily having a *publicist* orientation, as Fraser does[29], then not all partial publics are counterpublics. So for example, /r/twoxchromosomes, which is intended as a discussion space for women, while it arguably satisfies all three definitions of a partial public, does not explicitly have a publicist orientation. It likely does affect discourse in reddit's total public, but this is not its intended purpose.

c.2) Subaltern counterpublic: As I have stated, counterpublics come in many forms. White supremacists, misogynists, atheists, feminists, anti-racists, socialists, and all kinds of political groups can and do form counterpublics to contest hegemonic ideas and expand their own. But still following Fraser, I will reserve the Gramscian term *subaltern* counterpublic for counterpublics which advocate for subordinate social groups.[30] Of course, which groups are 'subordinate' might be debatable, as members /r/whiterights and /r/mensrights would want to argue that whites and males are in fact oppressed groups in society. /r/whiterights explicitly bills itself as being "for victims of minority oppression, and their sympathizers."[31] But perhaps to the anger of some postmoderns, I will only call groups subordinate if there is sociological evidence for their objective material subordination.[32] The ideal example here will be /r/shitredditsays or 'SRS,' a subreddit founded to call reddit out on its sexism, racism, transphobia, and general bigotry. It has spawned a whole network of 58 related subreddits at my latest count,[33] including

29 Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 124.

30 Ibid., 68.

31 From the description of /r/whiterights. "White Rights," *reddit.com*, accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.reddit.com/r/whiterights.

32 I do not expect anyone reading this essay to call the continuing subordination of Blacks in the United States into question, but for helpful reviews of its significance today, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: New Press, 2012)*;* Michael Brown et al., *Whitewashing Race: The myth of a color-blind society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Ashley Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *White Out* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

33 "ShitRedditSays," *reddit.com*, accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.reddit.com/r/shitredditsays.

dozens of SRS alternatives to regular subreddits, such as /r/SRSPolitics, /r/SRSNews, /r/SRSBooks, etc.—a "war of position" if I ever saw one![34]

d) Universal public: For my final definition I will call the 'universal public' the rightful holder of the claim to being *the* public sphere, as opposed to the total public. This is the public sphere which Geoff Eley calls the "structured setting where cultural and ideological contest and negotiation among a variety of publics take place,"[35] i.e. it is the collection of all publics and the interactions between them. Instead of a single public in which all discussion takes place, the universal public provides us with an arena in which many publics compete for hegemony, including contestation over what constitutes common concern, and the form of the interaction between publics. This public also has a normative and a descriptive dimension. The notion of a universal public is able to describe the multiplicity of publics that exist on the Net, not all of which necessarily interact with each other. This is the aspect of the Internet which Habermas decried when he wrote: "In the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics."[36] However, it also recognizes that these publics are to a large extent interconnected. They link to each other in ways that the metaphor of a 'web' only partially captures. They interact with each other, and developments on one corner of the web are often matched by developments in other corners. On the normative side, the universal public represents an ideal of this picture, in which the setting encourages interactions and contestations between these publics.

So far I have been using the term 'Netizen' relatively loosely. From here on, it will mean specifically a member of one of the various public spheres I have just defined.

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34 Besides Fraser, I will draw much of my analysis of subaltern counterpublics from Antonio Gramsci's writings on hegemony, the war of position, and common sense especially as expounded in Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 229-39.

35 Geoff Eley, "Nations, Public, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 306.

36 Jürgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research," *Communication Theory* 16 (2006): 414n3.

With these foundations set, let us now move to the critique of total public spheres and their online version, proceeding by critiquing the three characteristics in (b) one by one, with a focus on race.

First we have the bracketing of difference. Note that on the Internet this is more than bracketing in the sense of merely pretending difference is not there. At least in text-based virtual communities, certainly including reddit, racial difference is quite literally *invisible*. This is the meaning of the epigraph for this section: "Nobody knows you're a dog," and unless a redditor identifies themselves as Black or white, it is impossible for one to know the race of people one is interacting with. I will expand on this and draw out further implications in the next section.

Even when users do identify themselves, their testimony is not always reliable. There are documented cases of white users posting racist jokes while pretending they are Black. For example, there is a three panel comic featuring a Black man holding a book titled "How to Get Welfare." The book reads "1. Be black [*sic*]. 2. Collect Welfare Check." For the punchline, the Black man looks up and says "Damn I wish I could read [*sic*]." The comic has been posted to reddit at least 40 times, according to reverse image search service Karma Decay.[37] At least three of the posters claimed to be Black, and at least another six claimed their Black friends or roommates approved of it. In the most notable case, reddit user yuesor posted the image to /r/funny claiming to be Black and got ousted for having posted pictures of himself in the past which revealed he was actually a white male. He still got 1,212 net upvotes. This instance of the image got 436,797 views.[38]

Besides these uses of racial invisibility with malicious intent, there are also ways invisibility affects minorities without any individual user meaning to attack them. For the above also shows that people generally accept that minorities have more experience with racism than

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37 "Karma Decay – Reverse image search of Reddit.com," *karmadecay.com*, accessed March 10, 2013, http://karmadecay.com/i.imgur.com/0QHUY.jpg. Note that not all images are indexed, so data from Karma Decay only shows minima.

38 "As a black male, I still find this funny: funny," *reddit.com*, accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/w3ic6/as_a_black_male_i_still_find_this_funny/; "imgur: the simple image sharer," *imgur.com*, accessed March 10, 2013, http://imgur.com/0QHUY. Note that the vote count for links is not the actual number of people that voted in favor of a post, as reddit 'fuzzes' the number to prevent spam. As there is not a better way of counting popularity on reddit, however, this is the number I will be using as a gauge throughout this paper. Suffice it to say that in this particular case the post made reddit's front page.

whites do, or at least an experience different from that of whites, and so their opinion on race-related issues has a certain weight that a white person's does not—hence why pretending to be Black is assumed to give more respectability to otherwise unacceptable racist jokes or beliefs. This is certainly not meant to imply most white people agree with the average Black view of racism, but merely to point out that well-intentioned whites might have an interest in hearing what they have to say. This is with good reason, for as Linda Alcoff argues, the phenomenological experience of race is constitutive of what race *is*.[39] Moreover, as she argues, "racial identity . . . permeates our being in the world, our being-with-others, and our consciousness of our self as a being-for-others."[40] Our experience as raced beings affects how we see the world, and so hearing what other raced beings have to say about their experience can help us gain a better understanding of race.[41]

But on the Internet, our 'credentials' as raced beings are meaningless. Anybody can claim to be Black, anybody can claim to be pink if they want to. More generally, as Hubert Dreyfus says, "anyone, anywhere, any time, can have an opinion on anything. All are only too eager to respond to the equally deracinated opinions of other anonymous amateurs who post their views from nowhere."[42] A reddit user called PhD_in_everything mocked this fact by quite convincingly pretending to be a professional expert on every topic discussed, one day being a Professor of Zoology, the next a former aide to Tony Blair. Without accepting Dreyfus' overly pessimistic conclusions, we can see how this may make discussions of race difficult, even when many users have good intentions. This is even more true when racially oppressed people are a minority, and so majority views can make it especially hard to see what the oppressed have to say. Thus racial invisibility ensures that even when racial difference is being thematized, those whose experiences are needed to understand the topic are not given an outlet for what they have to say.

Thus the bracketing of difference that we see in virtual total public spheres is even worse than bracketing IRL. For given the invisibility of race on the Net, even explicitly thematizing

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39 Linda Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 184.

40 Ibid., 194.

41 I thank Charles W. Mills for clarification on this paragraph.

42 Dreyfus, 78.

racial difference is not enough to give spaces for people of color to voice their concerns. This is only exacerbated by the other two aspects of total public spheres, to which I now turn.

I have little to add to Fraser's masterful critique of "common concern." The most relevant point here is that "only participants themselves can decide what is and what is not of common concern to them. However, there is no guarantee that all of them will agree."[43] That is, there is no a priori way to decide what is and what is not up for discussion, other than discussion itself. But in a single, all-encompassing public sphere, what the hegemonic group thinks is of common concern is what will be discussed, to the detriment of the subordinated. In the case of race, this means that problems that affect people of color will go under-examined, or will be seen as individual problems rather than part of a larger pattern in society. This is in line with the contemporary tendency to see racism as the acts of individual people rather than a systemic problem. On reddit, "common concern" is defined by users' votes, so that posts considered of concern to the majority of users is what gets to the forefront of discussion.

Which leads us to inclusion. This critique is an old one. The gist of it is that formal inclusion is not enough to ensure actual inclusion—all kinds of informal barriers to entry may still ensure the exclusivity of the public sphere. I provide here an incomplete list of ways in which minorities may be excluded from participation:

a) Access: The promise of inclusion means little if people lack the resources to actually access the public sphere. In this case, this means regular access to a computer, the technical expertise to use it, and the time to use it to participate in online discussions. This is what has come to be called the "digital divide." While the racial gap seems to have narrowed in the past decade, it is still significant. As of 2011, 80% of non-Hispanic whites used the Internet, which surpasses the 71% of non-Hispanic Blacks, and 68% of Hispanics that did.[44]

b) Culture: Fraser points out that "unequally empowered social groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles."[45] So what is taken to be the 'right' way to express

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43 Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 129.

44 Kathryn Zickuhr and Aaron Smith, "Digital differences," *Pew Internet* (2012), 5.

45 Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 120.

oneself in the public sphere may well be the cultural style of the dominant group. In this context, redditors' penchant for correcting each other's grammar and spelling stops being a nerdy quirk, and becomes a way to keep out those who express themselves differently.

c) Violence: While it is true that one cannot literally punch someone in the face on the Internet, one can come close enough. In "A Rape in Cyberspace," now a classic of the history of virtual communities, Julian Dibbell tells the story of a mass 'rape' in the virtual world of LambdaMOO. A user forced the avatars of other members of the community to perform sexual acts without their consent through an exploit[46] of the community's code. This violation made at least one other user upset enough to cry—"a real-life fact that should suffice to prove that the words' emotional content was no mere playacting," in the author's words.[47] As we should expect, attacks of this nature tend to target subordinate groups more often than dominant groups. For example, a recent study showed that silent IRC users with 'female' names received 163.0 malicious private messages per day, often of a sexual nature, compared to only 27.5 for users with 'male' names and 65.0 for users with ambiguous names.[48] I have personally been called 'nigger' via reddit's private messaging system, despite not being Black. Which shows another side of racial invisibility: one need not be Black or a woman, but merely appear to be one to receive all the violence that is typically meted out to them.

d) Stereotyping: Some might think this is a subcategory of violence, but I would like to distinguish the two, reserving violence for attacks directed at individuals (by virtue of the group they belong to), and stereotyping for attacks against a larger group (in itself). Stereotypes on the Net are so abundant it is hard to choose which one to use as an example.[49] Suffice it to say there is an entire community of 4,596 members dedicated to

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46 Exploit is the noun used in computer security to refer to a piece of software that takes advantage of a vulnerability in another piece of software.

47 Julian Dibbell, "A Rape in Cyberspace: How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database Into a Society," *The Village Voice* (2005), accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-10-18/specials/a-rape-in-cyberspace/full/.

48 Robert Meyer and Michel Cukier, "Assessing the Attack Threat Due to IRC Channels," *International Conference on Dependable Systems and Networks* (2006), 471.

the most horrible, brutal stereotypes of Blacks.[50] It would be wonderful if stereotyping was confined to such marginal communities, but in fact it pervades reddit as a whole. The comic I mentioned earlier about the illiterate, welfare-dependent Black is also the most upvoted post ever at 6,241 in /r/ImGoingToHellForThis, a community of 208,392 dedicated to offensive humor.[51] It can also take place outside of the typical arenas of discussion. For example, a user created the subreddit /r/blackfathers, and set it so that nobody could post anything to it—the joke being that Black fathers are always absent. Despite attempts to take it over by offended users, reddit's rules grant incontestable power over a subreddit to its creators, and to this day the cruel joke still stands.

e) Common concern: I have talked about how making issues of common concern the topic of discussion can lead a total public sphere to avoid discussion of topics that affect minorities. This also has consequences for inclusion, since users are less likely to participate in communities that do not address their concerns. Blacks may choose not to participate in a community that never speaks of the specific problems that Blacks face, in favor of one in which they can speak of issues that concern them as Blacks.

f) Tokenism: I have spoken of ways in which minorities are discouraged from participating in discussions. However, there is also a way in which Black voices can be silenced by allowing some unrepresentative Blacks to speak for everyone. Whenever a discussion of race comes up on reddit, such as a recent one about diversity,[52] a (supposedly) Black voice is highlighted which reinforces the viewpoint of the white majority. In this case, commenter rancor_james said, in the second highest comment in the thread: "I'd argue

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49   For a more thorough discussion of stereotypes in their virtual form, see Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, (New York: Routledge, 2002).

50   "Niggers," *reddit.com*, accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.reddit.com/r/niggers. To my knowledge, this community is larger than any actual Black community, the next largest being /r/BlackGirls at 1,800. "stuff black girls like," *reddit.com*, accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.reddit.com/r/BlackGirls.

51   "ImGoingToHellForThis," *reddit.com*, accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.reddit.com/r/ImGoingToHellForThis/top. In this occasion, the image got 750,786 views. "imgur: the simple image sharer," *imgur.com*, accessed March 10, 2013, http://imgur.com/iB6Kj.

52   "Why are white communities the only ones that 'need diversity'? Why aren't black, Latino, asian, etc. communities 'in need of diversity'?" *reddit.com*, accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/18x5a2/why_are_white_communities_the_only_ones_that_need.

most 'minorities' dont care about diversity. It's a concern that other white people have that has been projected onto 'minority community' as some shit we care about but truly dont [sic]." That is, exactly what reddit wanted to hear. It may well be that most Blacks who posted in this thread argued the exact opposite, but given reddit's voting system, the opinions which are approved by the white majority rise to the top, while the ones that may challenge their preconceptions sink to the bottom. This is what on reddit is often known as the 'hive mind' mentality.

g) Derailing: Fraser reminds us of the many subtle ways in which men tend to dominate discussions in real life, such as speaking for longer and interrupting women. I submit that the online equivalent of this form of domination is what Internet feminists have come to call 'derailing,' that is, diverting a discussion of one topic into a discussion of a tangentially related one, typically from one which challenges the dominant group into one that leaves power relations unquestioned.[53] For a recent example, a post about Patrick Stewart's call to end domestic violence against women was met with several dozen redditors asking a version of the question: "But what about the men? Why aren't we talking about violence against men?" This is not a bad question in itself, but in the context, it served to completely avoid a discussion of violence against women in favor of a discussion of violence against men.[54]

h) Self-censorship: This might be seen as a product of previous barriers, but I would argue that it has some independence too. It has been shown that Blacks will present 'tamer' versions of their views to a white interviewer than to an interviewer of their same race.[55] Given that these were confidential interviews, it does not seem that we could easily

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53   There used to be a wonderful website that documented a myriad different forms of derailing, but unfortunately, as of March 10, 2013, it appears to be defunct. In case it ever comes back to life, the address used to be http://www.derailingfordummies.com.

54   "Sir Patrick Stewart calls on 'one million men' to promise an end to violence against women | The Lookout," *reddit.com*, accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.reddit.com/r/news/comments/19yzib/sir_patrick_stewart_calls_on_one_million_men_to/.   Granted that the top comment as of this date calls all the other comments out for their misogyny.

55   Darren Davis, "Nonrandom Measurement Error and Race of Interviewer Effects Among African Americans," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (1997): 183-207.

attribute their shyness to any of the other factors with ease. Thus it is possible that Blacks self-censor in front of white audiences due to factors independent of those already listed here, such as wishing to appear more respectable, or trying not to frighten whites with their more 'radical' views.

What all of these factors show is that it is impossible to isolate the public sphere from social, political, and economic factors that have their basis in material reality. Inclusion is only formal, but not actual, in the face of all of the barriers listed here. This is the point Marx was making when he said:

> Only when the real, individual man re-absorbs in himself the abstract citizen, and as an individual human being has become a *species-being* in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation, only when man has recognised and organised his "*forces propres* [own forces]" as *social* forces, and consequently no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of *political* power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished.[56]

That is, one cannot separate the "abstract citizen" as a member of the public sphere from the real individual, who must go to work every day, who has a family, who gets "stopped and frisked" by the police, who is seen as a criminal because of the color of her skin, who has to hear racist slurs from his school mates. In order to truly include the "abstract citizen" into the public sphere—or in this case, the Netizen detached from his body into the virtual public sphere—a significant amount of social equality is necessary.

In a society that lacks social equality, in which people exist within structural relations of domination and subordination (i.e. what Fraser calls a "stratified society"[57]), I believe I have shown that the characteristics of total public spheres all but ensure that they will reproduce the hegemony of dominant groups. This is not necessarily in the sense that they will be a majority in number, but more importantly in the sense that their ideas will be hegemonic, so that even when they are articulated by members of subordinate groups, they are in some sense still speaking in

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56 Marx, "On the Jewish Question," 169. Marx is echoing Rousseau in his use of *forces propres*.

57 Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 122.

the dominant voice. In a context of hegemony, the views of the dominant group become 'common sense,' as Gramsci termed it, defined as "the conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man is developed."[58] If all we had on the Internet were total publics, there would not be much in it for the subordinated. Thankfully, the Internet is overflowing with all kinds of partial publics. I will leave a more thorough discussion of partial publics for the third section. For now I will focus on a potential criticism of what I have laid out so far.

A defender of total public spheres might say that all of my critique so far has amounted to 'mere' sociology, and that it says nothing about total publics as *ideal*. That is, just because in our imperfect world the promise of a liberal, democratic, and unified public sphere on the Internet is unrealized, it does not mean that there is anything wrong with total public spheres *in principle*.

Now, the poser of this question surely does not mean that the ideal of a total public sphere is defensible in the abstract, as completely divorced from reality. The value of a political ideal must lie in its use for our real political lives. Besides, practically any political idea, no matter how abhorrent, can be defended in the abstract if one never needs to defend its potential application to the real world.

So the ideal of the total public sphere can only be defended if holding it as a principle can help us advance from our deficient version towards one that actually realizes its ideals. Now, given the criticisms I have provided, let us see how the ideal of total publics can help us overcome these problems.

We start from the last principle we have studied, that of inclusion. Given all of the ways in which inclusion is violated, I have made the case that nothing short of *actual* social equality would allow for real inclusion in a total public sphere. We would have to ensure that members of all groups have equal access to the public, that no one group's culture is held to be superior than any others, that it is very difficult to inflict violence on subordinate groups, that it is not usual to stereotype members of other groups, that the views of minorities are taken into account when deciding what is of common concern, etc. In this sense, then, holding up the ideal of inclusion is

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58 Gramsci, 419.

nothing but holding up the ideal of social equality in the material realm, which I would not wish to contest.

But now the question becomes: Does the ideal of a total public sphere help us achieve social equality? Well, if the critique of the bracketing of social inequality in order to participate in a single sphere "as if" all were equal is correct, then surely it does not. For it appears that what would be required to advance towards greater equality would be precisely to go against the ideal of a total public sphere. That is, to allow for partial publics in which subordinates may articulate their own concerns in their own terms, to allow for contestation between these publics and the larger public sphere, to explicitly thematize questions of racial oppression and social inequality rather than bracket them, and to make special provisions to ensure that the views of minorities are heard and respected in the spaces in which publics interact. In sum, to help achieve the third ideal of total public spheres it appears that we must abandon all of its other premises. In that case, what is the use of holding a total public as an ideal? Its use might be as an ideal for the future, once social equality is achieved. Or perhaps we can hold publicity itself as an ideal, to avoid enclaving and fragmentation of the public. But Fraser makes a good case that even in an egalitarian, multi-cultural society, a single public would privilege majoritarian cultures over others, thus reproducing the social relations of old.[59] Thus even an equal society must have a multiplicity of publics intermingling in a universal public. And if all that is left of total public spheres is publicity itself, as well as the ideal of social equality which must be realized outside of it, I should hope this to be sufficient proof that we have no use for the ideal of a total public sphere.

I now turn away from the bird's eye view I have been working with so far to focus on the experience of Netizens from their own point of view.

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59 Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 126.

2. Identity on the Net

Being black on reddit is like being a pet in a fucking zoo.

—homeboy5925, reddit.com

Like many others from my generation, one of my first experiences with the social aspect of the Internet was through RuneScape, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) in which users immerse themselves in the kind of medieval European fantasy world typical of other role-playing games. I was about 12 when I joined, and I recall spending quite a bit of time trying to get my avatar to look as similar to the real me as possible. There were only a few shades of skin color, none of which really fit me, so I settled for a tone quite a bit darker than my real skin. At the time I identified most strongly with the Arab side of my family, so I figured if I had lived a few centuries ago I would have looked a bit more Moorish.

I soon struck up a friendship with a girl about my age, let us call her Roxy, who said she was from the United Kingdom. Her avatar in the game was blonde, and her skin the lightest color allowed by the game's minimal palette. This seemed to match what I would have expected from a British person. We kept conversing over several days through RuneScape's private messaging system. This proved cumbersome after a while, so I offered to switch to a more standard instant messaging client, to which she happily agreed.

Imagine my surprise when I am greeted by a Black girl, who turned out to be a recent West African immigrant to London trying to make some friends on the Internet. At the time I was quite confused—I simply could not understand why anyone would want an avatar that looked so different from their real selves. Now that I know of all the hate and harassment directed at Blacks and women on the Internet, perhaps what would really surprise me is that she was brave enough to choose a female avatar.

What I have just described was my first experience with what I would much later learn is known as 'racial passing.' Far from this being an isolated incident, only possible in communities where users depict themselves graphically through an avatar, I will argue that semi-conscious

passing as white is in fact the default for most minorities in online communities.[60] I will then analyze what this means for racial identity on the Net, and implications for virtual public spheres.

The famous adage reproduced in the epigraph of the previous section perfectly captures the kind of pseudonymity users of virtual communities typically enjoy: "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." It is not too common for users to be completely anonymous,[61] instead, users create their own identities through their self-descriptions, they *write themselves into being*, to paraphrase danah boyd.[62] This is sometimes done by means of a conscious self-presentation in an official 'profile page,' a portion of the website designed specifically so that users can share some information about themselves with their fellow users. But even when this feature is lacking, users still write themselves into being through what they say of themselves in their conversations with other users. For example, if a user comments: "My wife goes running to Navy Pier every morning," his audience will conclude that they are married, statistically most likely to be male, at least in their late twenties, and that they live in Chicago. This is not necessarily correct, but it is enough for users to get a picture of who they are interacting with. On reddit, one is able to go through a user's old comments in their user page, so an interested person may piece together quite a bit of information about another user.

In our real life, we can and do infer much from a person's visible identity. In Alcoff's words, "it is an indisputable fact about the social reality of mainstream North America that racial consciousness works through learned practices and habits of visual discrimination and visible marks on the body."[63] In the Internet, or at least its text-based spheres, all visual cues are erased, and what we have left is only the person's textual identity.

Now, as we have seen, users have good reasons to hide their race and their gender on the Net. It is fairly common for women to choose gender-neutral or even male names, and it is rare

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60 The terminology I use for passing is drawn from Mills' discussion of "Racial Transgressives" in Mills, 55-66.

61 The most notable exception is the infamous 4chan.org.

62 danah boyd, "Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics," (PhD diss., UC Berkeley, 2008), 119.

63 Alcoff, 195.

for people to bring up their race at all, unless it is relevant to the discussion. A Korean-American woman told Lisa Nakamura in an interview that she "never outright . . . said [she] was Asian, because [she] felt that IRL . . . people already have stereotypes and felt that it would be at least as bad there [in her virtual community], and [she] wanted to have a character that was free from that."[64]

I would submit, however, that the habit of visual discrimination is so ingrained in the consciousness of members of our society, in their 'common sense,' that this does not mean that people who refuse to identify with their race are somehow 'raceless' while they are online. Instead, users are assigned a race by default, depending on their virtual sphere.

Nakamura's interviewee continued: "It bugs me that people just assume you're white if you don't say otherwise."[65] This is what Nakamura calls 'default whiteness,' a term I will adopt and generalize. I argue that the default race will be whichever one is hegemonic in any given sphere, and in particular, that in total spheres the default race will always be the dominant race.

For this I will adopt Louis Althusser's argument that "ideology interpellates individuals into subjects."[66] What this means is that one becomes a particular kind of subject only through ideology, that there is no essential being that makes us a subject outside of our (ideologically mediated) social context. As an example, imagine I am walking down the street and see a man who has dropped his wallet. I will call him, "Excuse me, sir!" Thus I refer to this specific person only through the mediation of ideology, an ideology that asks me to address males older than myself as 'sir,' and he recognizes that I am addressing him also through the mediation of this shared ideology. Althusser uses the example of religious ideology to show that ideology interpellates subjects already with various roles, tasks, social positions assigned. The 'voice' of religion speaks to an individual called Pierre, and tells him: "Here is who you are . . . ! Here is your origin . . . ! Here is your place in the world! Here is what you should do!"[67]

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64 Nakamura, 47.

65 Ibid.

66 Louis Althusser, "Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État. (Notes pour une recherche), " *Les classiques des sciences sociales* (1970), 50. All translations from this text by the author.

67 Ibid., 52.

In a society where ideology is raced and gendered, then, the subjects interpellated by ideology are also raced and gendered, and subjects must necessarily be assigned the roles and positions given to raced and gendered beings. Note that this is a much thicker notion of interpellation than simply addressing someone as 'sir.' It is more akin to the religious interpellation, in that a significant part of one's social identity is already contained in the call of ideology—already mixed with stereotypes and norms that determine how one must act and interact with others.[68] So even when we lack the visible cues to assign an individual with the 'correct' race and gender, we still do it out of unconscious reflex, although we may stumble like when we take an extra step when walking up stairs in the dark.

Some might say they are truly color-blind, and that they can escape ideology, perhaps through some combination of education and training. And it may be true for some people. However, there is also a gap between those who claim to be color-blind, and yet act in racist ways in certain occasions. Several studies have shown the discrepancy between the actions and words of people when it comes to race, especially when they believe they are in a private setting, or when they believe they can get away with it by using euphemisms.[69] I believe Gramsci can help us understand this discrepancy between actions and professed beliefs with his discussion of common sense. He believes it is not enough to explain it away as 'self-deception,' except in individual cases. Instead he claims:

> In these cases the constrast between thought and action cannot but be the expression of profounder contrasts of a social historical order. It signifies that the social group in question may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes—when, that is, the group is acting as an organic totality.[70]

Gramsci is speaking of a case in which the unconscious collective action—class struggle—represents the 'good sense,' the embryo of a more elevated perspective, and consciousness is the old, traditional common sense which people only adopt "for reasons of submission and

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68 I again thank Charles W. Mills for forcing me to clarify this.

69 Cf. the studies in part III of Doane and Bonilla-Silva.

70 Gramsci, 326-7.

intellectual subordination."[71] In the case of proclaimed color-blindness and discriminatory actions we have a case of the opposite, in which the good sense is the conscious and the common sense is the unconscious. But I believe his analysis still holds, and the discrepancy still represents a contrast of "social historical order."

This contrast is the role that various groups played in the building of American racial hegemony. This hegemony was not built by either crude ideological manipulation from the (white) ruling class, nor by pure force of the state, but by "the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent."[72] At times this meant giving special privileges to whites and suppressing Blacks, while at others it meant making room for Black civil rights within the established order.[73] This system still persists today in the form of discrimination in the labor market and the criminal justice system, the difference in wealth between Black and white families, and continued segregation in schools and neighborhoods. Thus whites are stuck in a position in which the social historical order still affords them relative privileges when compared to Blacks (although no longer formally), and yet they are expected to treat Blacks as equals in public, as hegemony in its current incarnation demands. And yet this order of subordination of Blacks must still be rationalized ideologically, if only in private or by euphemisms. Thus Blacks are seen as being lazy, as having criminal tendencies, as being unable to maintain a traditional bourgeois family, or as being intellectually lesser. At the same time, this implies that whites are the opposite. I must insist: This does not mean every white person believes this, or even that any one person believes this all the time, but merely that when acting as a collective they have a tendency to express these common sense attitudes.

It is for these reasons that common sense asks that we assign a race to individuals we interact with in the virtual public sphere. Race still carries a lot of meaning for our social relations in this hegemonic system of Black subordination.

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71 Ibid.

72 Gramsci, 80n49.

73 For a helpful discussion of the building of racial hegemony in the United States, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*. (New York: Routledge, 1986), 78-82.

Which race we assign to others by default will be determined by the ideology which permeates the space in which we encounter them. For example, the dominant race is hegemonic in the total public sphere, as we have already shown. It then follows that in an encounter with a Netizen of a total public sphere, I will assume by default that this person is white. Going back to our Althusserian vocabulary, we can say that total public spheres interpellate their Netizens as white (and, I would add, also male, heterosexual, cisgendered, etc.). The conclusion from this is that, unless they openly tout their race to the public, minorities will be passing as white by default in white-dominated publics.

Somebody might object that when we do this we are merely taking reasonable guesses by applying statistical inference, and that all this talk about ideology and interpellation is pure mystification. But there are many other aspects of a person's identity that we never bother to take guesses at, at least not on a regular basis. Think for example of marital status, a significant enough form of identity to appear on most identification cards. It is fairly rare, in my experience, for users to simply assume someone's marital or relationship status, though it is quite common for them to ask. However, for most virtual communities it is probably fairly safe to assume that most users are unmarried, given that the majority tend to be in their twenties. Our objector might say that the difference is that marital status is not necessary to visualize our interlocutors, so we do not need to assume anything about it. However, think of other aspects of a person's looks which people also tend to make few assumptions about, such as hair or eye color. It seems like a fair assumption that most people have black hair, and yet you will probably never find users forced to correct others on their right hair or eye color, nor will you find users surprised that others' hair color is different from what they expected.

This objection obscures the very problem I am trying to thematize with the discussion of ideology and interpellation. Why do we make inferences about race and gender, and not other aspects of a person's identity? Whether the inference is statistical or not, we only need to make it in the first place because race and gender are thought to be significant to an individual's identity as a subject. This is not natural, it is not just a "reasonable guess," but the product of ideology, which subjectifies individuals already as raced and gendered. This is what it means for

individuals to be "always already subjects."[74] Individuals are always already subjectified by ideology in a particular way, which is dependent on social and historical context.

On the other hand, ideology is itself constituted by its subjects.[75] An ideology which interpellates individuals as whites is then constituted by whiteness, i.e. the ideology itself is also white. Then public spheres in which white ideology is hegemonic ought to be considered white in themselves, and not merely white-dominated. To illustrate this, consider a reverse example. danah boyd interviewed teenagers across the country on their reasons to switch from MySpace to Facebook. One particular respondent said: "It's not really racist, but I guess you could say that. I'm not really into racism, but I think that MySpace now is more like ghetto or whatever."[76] Through her obviously racialized use of the word ghetto to refer to MySpace, boyd's interviewee shows how spaces themselves can be raced. This usage is fairly common in speech, though often through euphemisms such as 'ghetto,' 'urban,' or 'inner city.' We say that universities are white, neighborhoods are ghetto (as an adjective), schools are inner city. This mode of expression is not merely accidental, but shows that race is in some sense constitutive of these spaces, it is part of their character. We associate all kinds of secondary characteristics to places according to their racial character, the same way we do it with people. An inner city neighborhood conjures up images of urban blight, violence, crime, poverty, etc., which flow out of their racial characterization.

Thus a white public, on top of the informal and more superficial barriers of entry I presented in the previous section, also poses an ontological barrier to the integration of minorities. Blacks wishing to participate in a white public are faced with a double strain: They are interpellated as white, so that they are forced into default passing; and they are entering a white space, so they do not belong in the ontological sense of not being the kind of person for whom the space exists. Blacks may still participate in a white public, but only with considerable strain to their identity. This is what I believe reddit user homeboy5925 was expressing in the

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74 Ibid., 50.

75 Ibid., 46.

76 danah boyd, "White Flight in Networked Publics? How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement With MySpace and Facebook," in *Race After the Internet*, ed. Linda Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), 203.

epigraph of this section: Being Black on reddit is like being a pet in a zoo in that one feels constantly out of place, like a penguin in San Francisco, so to speak. Earlier in the comment, he also said "Reddit: a place where you literally cannot be a minority and exist without having the fact that you're a minority shoved in your face/made fun of."[77] A Black person in a white public is forced into the contradictory state of being invisible and yet all too conspicuous, to pass as white on the Net while simultaneously being more than aware of the Blackness of their material body. It is because of this, then, that it sometimes appears that the Internet is more racist than IRL, that Blacks are more trapped in their bodies than before they log on. IRL, Blacks are interpellated as Black, and the common sense racism of whites is hidden. In spaces in the virtual world in which whiteness is hegemonic, which is to say most spaces, they have access to an aspect of the racial order which is typically only visible in the intimate spheres of whites, i.e. in white spaces in which individuals are interpellated as white. They have access to the white side of the hegemonic order.

This is the kind of barrier to entry that cannot be removed by simply tweaking a rule or two, the kind of barrier that no merely formal change can break. These barriers involve deep-seated beliefs and feelings as well as structural forms of domination that permeate the social order. In the next section I will borrow Gramsci's analogy for civil society to analyze what it would take to improve this seemingly unresolvable situation.

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77 "homeboy5925 comments on My new best friend," *reddit.com*, accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.reddit.com/r/aww/comments/13pwit/my_new_best_friend/c768oqu. The comment was posted in response to a myriad of racist comments in response to a simple picture of a Black man holding a puppy.

3. Counterpublics and Cyber-Resistance

What is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today, is in many of its most effective manifestations serving the cause of oppression.

Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance"

Gramsci famously characterized civil society as "a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks" which constitute the hegemony of the established order.[78] We could think of the set of barriers to entry that I have described in the last two sections as a series of overlapping trenches keeping non-whites from fully participating in the public sphere. The Gramscian conclusion would be that the hegemony cannot be broken in one coup by a direct assault, but only though a protracted war of position against the status quo.

We have now hopefully gained a sufficient understanding of these trenches to sketch a strategy for taking them. Following Fraser, we have also pointed what the force will be that can bring that change: the subaltern counterpublic. But as Gramsci notes, in politics "the siege is a reciprocal one," so before we can speak of how to attack the hegemony we must speak of how we can defend the counterpublic.

To defend the subaltern counterpublic in the virtual world is to defend the ability to form and sustain a space in which difference is not hidden, but a subject of discussion; where certain individuals may be excluded to give space to the subordinates; and where the subject of discussion is decided by the members of the subordinate group. But to achieve this requires granting the counterpublic a degree of political power to run its own community. I have not yet spoken of a final distinction that is common when discussing the public sphere, and that is its separation from political power. Political power on the Internet comes primarily in the form of the management of the communities themselves. It appears, then, that for a subaltern counterpublic to satisfy its objectives, it must also be vested with a degree of power over its own community, at a minimum the power to choose who can and who cannot be a member of it. Thus democratic self-management of the counterpublic is the first necessity for its defense.

A cautionary tale comes from the community /r/feminism on reddit. The moderators there

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78 Gramsci, 238.

chose a relatively lax moderation policy, which, in the eyes of many members of the community, meant that feminist views were often eclipsed by non-feminists who came to voice their opinions in their subreddit. This led to a long-standing feud, with /r/feminisms set up as an alternative to /r/feminism, and /r/WhereAreTheFeminists set up to document the perceived invasion of /r/feminism by brigaders from unsympathetic subreddits.

It is no wonder, then, that /r/shitredditsays, which I have characterized as the prime example of a subaltern counterpublic on reddit, is often criticized in the larger reddit community for its supposedly draconian moderation policy. The reciprocal siege that Gramsci speaks of means that any encroachment on the hegemony, no matter how minimal, is perceived as an existential threat by at least some members of the dominant groups. Therefore, to defend a subaltern counterpublic requires an ever watchful eye and the power to keep defenders of the hegemony out. SRS has a total of 41 moderators for a community of only 34,030,[79] or more moderators than any of the ten largest subreddits.

This brings up a larger point about the way communities on the Net are moderated. At least on reddit, the standard form of moderation emphasizes a 'laissez-faire' approach, both at the individual subreddit level and at the larger, reddit-wide level. Thus casual racism is allowed to exist in most communities, and incredibly racist communities are allowed to exist within the reddit archipelago of communities. This kind of tolerance sometimes passes for progressive on the Internet, and its defenders often genuinely believe themselves to be warriors for freedom. However, following Herbert Marcuse's famous argument put forward in his essay "Repressive Tolerance," I will argue here that in the current system "tolerance is extended to policies, conditions, and modes of behavior which should not be tolerated because they are impeding, if not destroying, the chances of creating an existence without fear and misery."[80] Tolerance of racist behavior constitutes one of the greatest barriers to inclusion on the Net.

We can now speak of attacks on the hegemony. In order to do this properly, we must fully acknowledge the limits of what can be achieved. We have already noted that full equality in debate cannot be achieved without substantial social equality, so that there is an upper limit to

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79 "ShitRedditSays."

80 Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 82.

how much can be gained on hegemony in the virtual front. Much of our attacks would have to be directed at the political economy of the material world, and there is not too much that can be done towards this on the Internet. However, some of the less daunting trenches could certainly be taken. Consider, for example, symbolic violence. An organized counterpublic can come out in defense of its comrades whenever they are attacked, and this can do much to counteract the day-to-day violence minorities suffer on the Net. Moreover, the counterpublic can advocate for policies which punish such violence in the larger public sphere. The same can be said of stereotypes, derailing, tokenism, and the definition of common concern. As for cultural exclusion and self-censorship, counterpublics can help empower the subalterns to express themselves in their own voice by providing a space in which they may comfortably do so.

We can thus see the counterpublic's role as being double. One is repressive, the other empowering. The first constitutes what Marcuse calls "liberating tolerance," which he perhaps unhelpfully characterizes as "intolerance against the movements of the Right, and toleration of movements from the Left."[81] A more useful definition might be: intolerance against those who perpetuate violence against the subordinated, those who wish to exclude them from the virtual public sphere, and toleration for the subaltern counterpublics and their subversive discourses. The second constitutes building a space in which common sense may be challenged, so that its "healthy nucleus" may give way to good sense.[82] A space in which the subordinated can come to see themselves as part of a counter-hegemonic emancipatory project. Of course, these aims should not be seen as opposed to each other, but as dialectically complementary. The subaltern are empowered to challenge hegemony, challenging hegemony constitutes their power. We look at each in turn.

In order for the subaltern counterpublic to fulfill its first function, contestation between publics must be allowed and facilitated. Furthermore, some degree of democratic power over the rules of engagement must be given to Netizens, unlike the current model of very little, erratic intervention from website administrators.

Here Fraser's reading of Habermas can help us understand what is needed with more

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81 Marcuse, 109.

82 Gramsci, 328.

accuracy. She defines 'normatively-secured' action as the kind of action which is "coordinated by tacit, prereflective, pregiven consensus" and 'communicatively-achieved' action as the kind of action which is "coordinated by explicit, reflective, dialogically achieved consensus."[83] Norms such as "free speech," or negatively "freedom from censorship," can be seen as normatively-secured when they are considered a right set in stone and not up for discussion. An example of this is the defenders of free speech who often reach for the First Amendment of the US Constitution as their defense of the principle—as if the American Constitution were God-given and applied everywhere independently of geography, time, or context. Instead, communicatively-achieved rules for discussion might allow for bans of symbolic violence, which would ironically make discussion more free by reducing the extent to which minorities are excluded from conversation.

Liberating tolerance requires that we allow for communicatively-achieved action to take the place of normatively-secured action in the shaping of discussions on the Net. This would allow users to democratically decide what should and what should not be tolerated in their communities. Given the lack of power users currently have over their virtual communities, this will require a significant amount of agitation from counter-publics, an increase in their influence proportional to the task at hand.

This is then a second way in which the politics of the Net must come under the sway of the discussions that go on within the public sphere: by allowing users to shape the way publics interact, and altering the platform itself to suit the needs of its users.

The second task of subaltern counterpublics is to create a subjective community of subalterns and their supporters that can challenge the hegemony. This can be achieved through participation in the subaltern counterpublic, especially when this space is made safe by careful administration, and when self-expression in the idiosyncratic cultural modes of the subaltern is encouraged. Over time, SRS has developed its own dialect of netspeak, with its community-specific memes,[84] in-jokes, and turns of phrases. At the same times, this community is forged

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83 Fraser, "What's Critical About Critical Theory?," 25n9.

84 An Internet meme is a concept, often humorous, that is transmitted from person to person on the web, usually slightly modified in each iteration.

through the shared struggle against hegemony, which can itself contribute to this subjective feeling of camaraderies.

I will now reject two facile arguments for alternative solutions to the problem of the virtual color line as laid out here.

The first appears to be a good solution at first glance. If part of the problem is racial invisibility, then why not make race visible? Why not assign each user a picture and a name that correspond to their real self? But this would be to miss the point entirely. Racism is manifested the way it is on the Internet in part due to racial invisibility, but this is still merely a manifestation of a deeper problem. On the contrary, having racism out in the open where we can see it allows us to better understand it, as well as challenge it at its roots. Attacking the hegemony on the virtual public sphere requires also that counterpublics attack common sense racism at its root, and not only its superficial manifestations. Liberating tolerance is only a means to this end, as suppressing those who wish to exclude the subordinated requires the support of many who currently tacitly tolerate racism, and their suppression can also encourage the increased participation of the subordinated.

The second would be to call for state control of the Internet, with policies that limit racially oppressive language on the Internet in general. This again relies on overly crude understandings of how racism and the state operate. If racism is a constitutive part of civil society, then it cannot be abolished by decree. All this will do is confine the open supporters of white supremacy to the dark corners of the web, and leave the common sense racism of the rest of the Internet intact. Furthermore, this assumes that the state is under the control of the subaltern to the extent that it can be moved to act on their behalf at will. But this is not the case, for otherwise more important steps towards social equality would have a higher priority today.

I end by restating that true equality on the Net can only be achieved alongside substantial social equality in the material world. However, insofar as the virtual public sphere plays a more important role in civil society every day, the virtual struggle will be a crucial part of any larger counter-hegemonic project. The central task on this front will be to move from the total public to a truly universal public. That is, a sphere which is no longer seen as an overarching, unified space for discussion, but as the space in which multiple publics interact and contest each other. A

space where difference is not obscured, but brought to light according to the needs of the various publics. Where the exclusion of the subordinated is minimized to the largest extent permitted by current social and historical conditions. All of this through the decision making of the Netizens, in a communicatively-achieved system of democratic equality.

Conclusion

I begun by characterizing the Internet as a kind of public sphere, and then critiqued one particular form it may take: the total public sphere. The basic thesis is that its promise of a unified space for discussion in which status differentials are ignored is unrealizable within a stratified society. I highlighted how the invisibility of race in the Internet contributes to the domination of whites, alongside many barriers to real inclusion.

I then went a step further, and showed how the invisibility of race creates a kind of default whiteness for users of total public spheres, and how whiteness thus becomes constitutive of white-dominated public spheres. This poses a further challenge to integration, as it creates a deeper, ontological barrier to inclusion, that runs deep in the common sense of users and the constitution of the space of discussion.

I ended by pointing towards ways in which white hegemony may be contested through the systematic creation of subaltern counterpublics. The task of these counterpublics is then to challenge hegemony by enforcing liberating tolerance, as well as empowering the subaltern to participate in the public sphere. This discussion showed us that political power ought not be separated from the space of discourse if we wish to make online debate more inclusive. However, we must remember that true inclusion will never be achieved by online contestation alone, given barriers of entry that have their root in political economy and not merely discursive space. The fight for true equality must be fought on the streets, but setting up a few barricades in cyberspace will hopefully contribute to our struggle.

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Illustrations

In Figure 1 I reproduce an image of reddit's front page from the perspective of a new user. At the center, there are posts from various communities. The arrows to the left allow the user to vote on posts. From here the user can navigate to other parts of the website by clicking on various links. Clicking on the 'comments' button redirects the user to the comments page for that particular post, as reproduced in Figure 2.
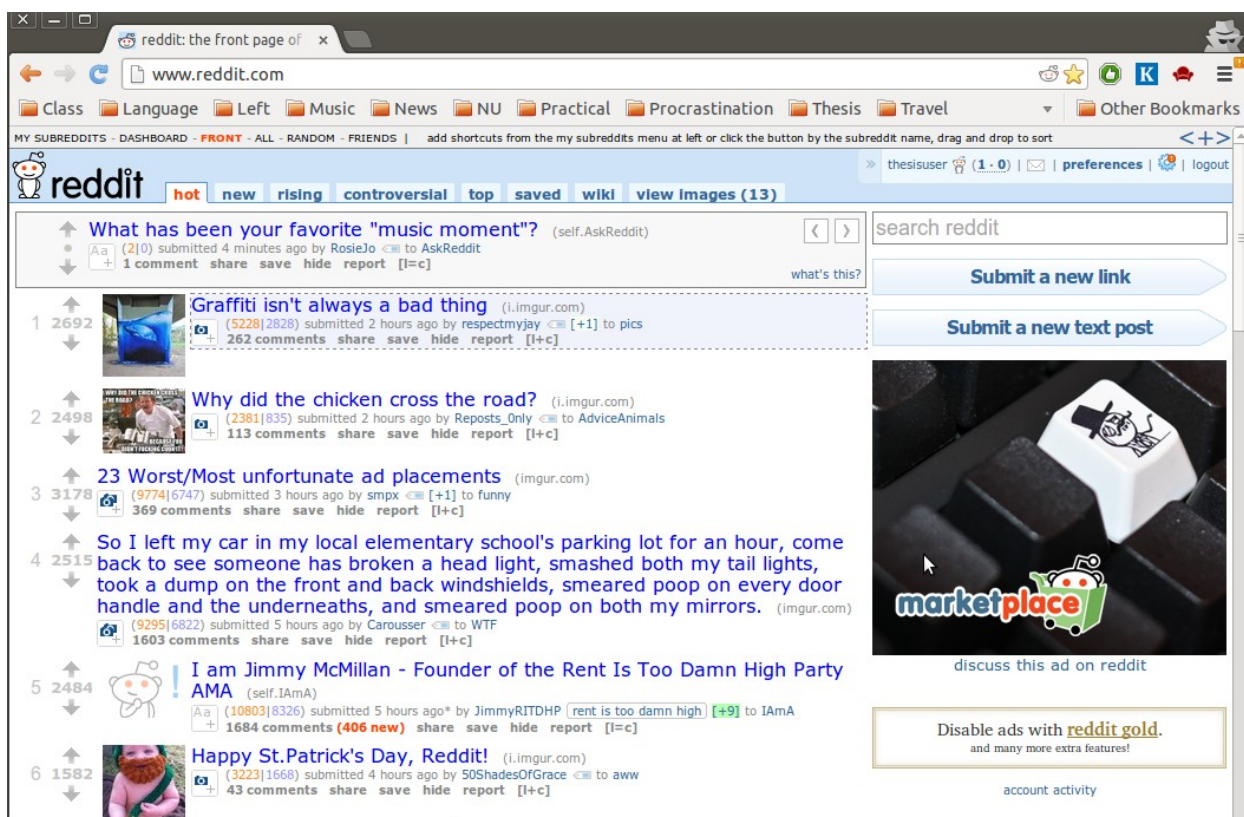
Figure 1: Sample from the reddit front page for a new user. *Source: "*reddit: the front page of the internet," *reddit.com*. Accessed March 17, 2013. http://www.reddit.com/.

The comments page works similarly. The comments are 'threaded' so that replies to comments are clearly visible below the comment they are replying to. The voting arrows are next to the user name of the person who made the comment. Comments can be collapsed and expanded for easier navigation though the comments thread. On the right, we can see the sidebar explaining the rules of the subreddit to which the post belongs. This sidebar is also visible in the subreddit's main page, which is similar to the front page but only shows posts in that community.

Figure 2: Sample from a reddit comments page as seen from the perspective of a new user.
Source: "I am Jimmy McMillan - Founder of the Rent Is Too Damn High Party AMA,"
reddit.com. Accessed March 17, 2013.
http://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/1agp5q/i_am_jimmy_mcmillan_founder_of_the_rent_is_too/.

Appendix: reddit's racial demographics

There are no scientific studies of reddit's demographics. To my knowledge, there have been two surveys of the user base, one by a reddit user and one by initiative of the administrators.[85] However, both are subject to voluntary response bias, so the results should not be accepted as scientific. Both suggest that the average redditor is a 20-something American male and middle class. Notably, fewer than 20% of respondents to the second survey were female. Unfortunately neither included race as a question.

There are two independent companies who do estimates of the demographics of various websites, however, I cannot vouch for their accuracy. I include their data on race here only for reference.
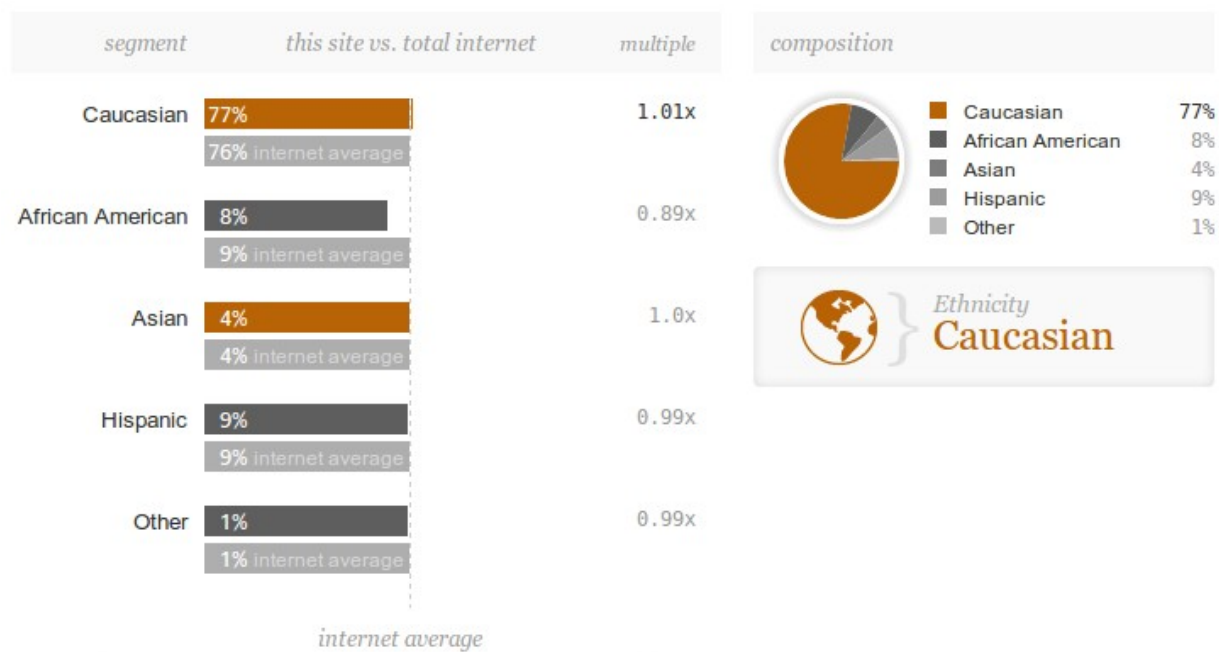

Figure 3: Quantcast's estimate of reddit users by ethnicity compared to the Internet average. *Source:* "Reddit.com Traffic and Demographic Statistics by Quantcast," *Quantcast*. Last updated February 2013, accessed March 10, 2013. http://www.quantcast.com/reddit.com#! demo&anchor=panel-ETHNICITY.

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85 jenakalif, "Who in the World is reddit?," *blog.reddit — what's new on reddit*. Published July 13, 2011, accessed March 10, 2013. http://blog.reddit.com/2011/07/who-in-world-is-reddit.html; jenakalif, "Who in the World is reddit? Results are in...," *blog.reddit — what's new on reddit*. Published September 12, 2011, accessed March 10, 2013. http://blog.reddit.com/2011/09/who-in-world-is-reddit-results-are-in.html.

As we can see, Quantcast's data suggest that the average reddit user is slightly more likely to be Caucasian and less likely to be African-American than the average Internet user.
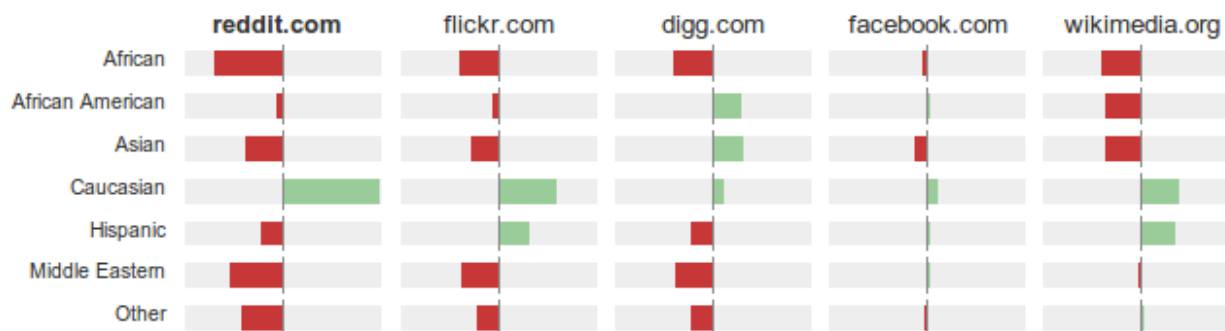

Figure 4: Alexa's estimate of reddit users by ethnicity compared to the Internet average, alongside some other popular websites. *Source:* "Reddit.com Site Info," *Alexa*. Last updated February 2013, accessed March 10, 2013. http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/reddit.com#. Note: These data cannot be accessed without installing the Alexa browser app.

Alexa's data also suggest that Caucasians on reddit are over-represented, but with much higher confidence. They also suggest all other groups are under-represented, although African-Americans are close to the Internet average.

/r/shitredditsays, my example of a subaltern counter-public, also conducted a voluntary survey of its user base. Of the respondents, a much higher percentage identified as female than on the general reddit survey, with a total of 37%. As for race, 79% identified as white, 10% identified as non-white, and 6% identified as 'mixed.'[86] Again, these results are certainly not scientific, and should not be taken as such.

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[86] "SRS Survey Results," *reddit.com*. Accessed March 10, 2013. http://www.reddit.com/r/ShitRedditSays/comments/nzipz/meta_srs_survey_results/.