Racial Discourse Networks: Race Blogs, Media Influence & the Possibilities for Collective Action

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Abstract

In this paper I analyze the network structure of race blogs in relation to the broader political blogosphere and traditional media landscape. Findings show that race blogs exhibit a multi-level, homophilous link structure with respect to non-race blogs, and among race blogs. Race blogs also frame their content in racial terms, unlike their non-race blog counterparts. I argue that these differences set race blogs apart from political blogs and warrant using a different theoretical lens to understand their nature and role within the U.S. political and media landscape. Specifically, I argue that race blogs should be viewed not only through the theoretical lens of political and media influence, but also through the lens of collective action.
By 1973, only one percent of U.S. citizens listed racial issues as one of the nations “most important problems” (Gallup, 1973). Despite riots, protests, high-profile racial trials and electing the country’s first Black President, racial issues consistently remain at the one percent mark to the present day. Race and racial issues are also consistently absent in public discourse and news coverage, except in brief moments of racial crises. What explains this now decades long decline of racial discourse in the public sphere? Three particular transformations that followed the civil rights gains of the 1960s provide particular insight. First, Hall (2005) cites a narrative transformation surrounding the civil rights movement’s historical trajectory. Hall argues that a splintering “movement of movements” aided and abetted a newly initiated, neoconservative narrative that cast the sixties’ landmark civil rights legislation as both the end of the movement and racism. One results was a growing desire to shift focus away from “the race problem” in public and political discourse, citing, in part, “colorblindness” as justification (Omi & Winant, 1994).

Dobbin (2009) cites network transformations to explain the decline of race in the public agenda. He argues that the visible networks of engaged civil rights movement activists, and the news media that broadcast their exploits, faded from the limelight after the late sixties. This activist network was largely replaced by a new professional, corporate and bureaucratic network that took the helm in defining and operationalizing equal opportunity and nondiscrimination guidelines set forth in the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. A new set of actors replaced civil rights activists, whose take-to-the-street protests, sit-ins, boycotts and marches chiseled racial equality and equal opportunity into the Constitution.

Finally, Mendelberg (2001) observed a cultural and expressive norm transformation overlapping these narrative and network transformations. She cites a normative shift away from racial inequality to one of equality. The shift she describes normalized racial acceptance and made the explicitly racist attitudes and expressions characteristic of our political past unacceptable. But Mendelberg and other scholars clearly point out that this norm transformation did not necessarily engender the kinds of hearts and minds change in citizens’ attitudes about race. Research on “new racism,” “symbolic racism,” “aversive racism,” “unconscious bias,” and the like suggest that emerging norms of racial equality, the retreat of racial protest politics from public view, and growing acceptance of the neoconservative narrative resulted in quite the opposite (Banaji et al., 1993; Kinder & Sears, 1981, McConahay & Hough, 1976). Animated by sublimated rather than transformed racial prejudices, whites began to resent not only government programs meant to curtail racial disparities, but to resent public discussion about race, racial disparities, discrimination, and racism altogether (Feldman & Huddy, 2005; Kinder & Winter, 2001). This has produced a kind of race fatigue, so much so that many in the U.S. view those who speak publicly about race as racist (Author, 2011).

The post-civil rights narrative, network, and norm transformation worked together to produce a general sense – in our personal, political, and media discourse – that race and racial issues are
insignificant, tangential, irrelevant, divisive and counterproductive (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

These transformations have a direct bearing on racial discourse, race-based collective action and racial justice activism, and they provide the context in which questions about blogs – race blogs in particular – emerge. As such, my purpose is to highlight race blogs as a particular form of cultural and media production, and to help determine what role they might play within the American media and political landscape. More specifically, I focus on race blogs’ structural connections to other race blogs, political blogs, and mainstream media sites in an effort to understand what significance race blogs may have for elevating public discourse about race and supporting racial justice activism.

Race Blogs, Information Networks and Political Influence

Race blogs lie on the path where America’s waning racial discourse, and the emergence of new media and communication technologies collide. The contemporary Web emerged within the context of a declining racialized public sphere. Including diverse and previously absent voices of racialized peoples was part of early Internet apologists’ utopian vision (Nakamura, 2002; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2011), and the creation and expansion of the blogosphere is, perhaps, one of the most tangible realizations of that vision. In this context, studying race blogs provides an opportunity to judge the veracity of claims that the Internet can indeed foster a more democratic public sphere.

Put simply, race blogs are a category of blogs/bloggers who write particularly about race, racial issues, and or nonracial issues from a particularly racialized vantage point. Harrington (2010) refers to them as “alternative ethnic-racial political blogs,” while Pole (2010) dubs them “rainbow bloggers.” Despite their identifiable presence within the blogosphere, however, they have received little attention. This is largely due to the fact that the extant research generally classifies them (at least implicitly) as a marginal blog type within the larger political blogosphere. This marginalization results from both empirical justification about the advent and development of blogs, as well as theoretical justification about how scholars have heretofore framed their approach to understanding blog inquiry.

First, political blogs and race blogs share a similar growth trajectory within the public sphere. Some of the top political blogs have relatively long histories. For instance, Drudge Report, TownHall, and FreeRepublic began in the mid-to-late 1990s. Others, such as CrooksandLiars, HuffingtonPost, or Politico, began in the mid-2000s, some as late as 2007. Despite their origins, A 2008 study showed that almost all of the top political blogs exploded between 2007 and 2008.1 Similarly, top-rated race blogs and race-focused news sites such as Racialicious, Colorlines, TheRoot, and TheGrio, began their ascent between 2007 and 2010. A second reason for incorporating race blogs within the larger political blog category is that many of the first, and now most influential race bloggers, viewed blogging as an explicitly political tool to push racial issues onto the public agenda, and to augment what many saw as simplistic analyses of racial issues by traditional news outlets (Harrington, 2010). As such, they produced content often

connected to two primary arenas where racial issues historically play out: electoral politics and public policy.

The third reason for the political/race blog overlap has to do with theoretical interests in, and justifications for studying relationships between new media and communication, political action and influence, and politics. Scholars typically frame questions about the blogosphere around agenda setting, two-step flow, public sphere, and other theories about information diffusion, opinion formation and social/political influence (Gruhl et al., 2004; Lawrence, Sides & Farrell, 2011; Matheson, 2004; Rodriguez et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2011). Broadly speaking, researchers ask the question, “do political blogs have influence?” and the answer has largely been – “no.” Research findings demonstrate that blog influence (usually on traditional media, and by extension, the broader public) operates according to a power law where a small handful of political blogs muster any real influence (Pappacarissi, 2009; Schradie, 2009). Their ability to extend their reach, some argue, depends on attracting the attention of elite bloggers who can then pass information up to traditional media sources (Swift, 2011).

This media environment, whose structural boundaries constrain the reach of the many and give voice to only a few produces what I call an aspiration/amplification model (AA model) of blog influence. The model represents blogs and bloggers as ladder-climbers competing for expanded audiences and broader influence. In such a model where the blog masses compete to reach the political blog and mass media elite, race blogs are almost destined to become a marginal footnote. Wolfsfeld (2011) lays out the dynamics of this model within the context of four major goals that organizations and movements have with respect to using the internet to secure political power: mobilizing their supporters; securing traditional news media attention to amplify the message to wider audiences; influence public opinion; and impact policing (17). The AA model, as I describe it, applies to the work of blogging where the ultimate goal is defined as securing tangible influence, and that influence is measured by the ability to have one’s content cited by, and propagated through traditional news and other major media sources. As such, the blogosphere gets segmented in much the same way that traditional, offline influence often proceeds – through elite opinion leaders who are, or have close and strong connections to, traditional news media sources. Political blogs generally operate as part of an information network where concerns for diffusion and influence predominate (Gomez-Rodriguez, Leskovec & Krause, 2010; Mitrović & Tadić, 2010; Nahon et al., 2011).

I argue throughout this paper, however, that race blogs are a significantly different blog category. Their distinction warrants viewing them through a broader scope than scholars have typically used to view political blogs and news media in general. While race blogs circulate within an information economy, their network structure and racialized framing suggests they function as an issue public or counter public that may actively or inadvertently support collective action. I do not argue that issues of influence that dominate analyses of political blog and media influence more generally do not apply. Rather, I argue that in order to begin to understand the role and function race blogs might play in producing more robust and sophisticated racial discourse – in itself and as a necessary condition for racial justice collective action.

Racialized Publics, Counter-Publics and Collective Action
Though the bourgeoning online environment paralleled discussions in timing only, the late twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries renewed a scholarly debate about the status and fate of identity politics in general, and black politics in particular. A significant aspect of that discussion included diverging arguments about the nature of marginalized public spheres. The debate had much to do with defining and opining about the veracity of subaltern publics spheres. Despite scholars’ claims that “counter public” best described the nature of the black public sphere, scholars such as Holt (1995) and Dawson (1995) rejected the viability of these claims. Holt did so more provisionally, insisting that a black counter public can only be designated as such if it provides explicit critique of the dominant public sphere and social order. Engaging in specific political action was Dawson’s litmus test for designating the black public sphere as a counter public. On this basis he remarked that no such sphere has existed in the post-Civil rights era, citing, in large part, the kind of fragmentation identified by Hall’s (2005) “movement of movements.”

Many scholars challenge claims pointing to the Black public sphere’s decline. Notable among them are early arguments advanced by Squires (2002) and Harris-Lacewell (2004). Squires suggests the notion of counter-public must be expanded to include both multiple, intersecting public spheres, consistent with Fraser’s (1992) notion of a subaltern public sphere that is set apart from the dominant public sphere on the one hand, but that is fragmented and intersectional on the other. Squires asserts that the black public sphere includes both those whose politics engage multiple points of identity, and differential degrees of engagement. She offers the distinction between enclaves, counter-publics, and satellite publics – each of which, she argues are viable parts of a subaltern public sphere in general and the Black public sphere in particular.

Harris-Lacewell extends this argument, demonstrating that what Holt may have referred to as “idle talk” (Holt, 1995, p.328), is actually meaningful political action. Whether emanating from black religious institutions, or black popular spaces such as the barbershop, hip hop, or the larger sphere of black media, Harris-Lacewell establishes discourse within a black public sphere as central to, and necessary for more tangible forms of black political engagement. She writes:

In black public space, in black organizations, and through black information networks, African Americans enter into dialogue with one another. Much of what they discuss is task-specific, personal or frivolous... But alongside these conversations is an everyday talk that helps black people to develop collective definitions of their political interests. Embedded within conversations that are not always overtly political is language that seeks to understand American inequality, to define the importance of race in creating inequality, to determine the role of whites in perpetuating inequality, and to devise strategies for advancing the interests of the self and group (4-6).

Consistent with this conception of the black public sphere, I argue that race blogs/bloggers may not only function to disseminate race-related information, but to engage in discourse about collective race-based interests, with either explicit motivation to, or implicit effect of spurring collective action around racial justice issues. To determine whether my argument comports with specific evidence to this effect, I frame my forthcoming analysis of a race blog network as a potential contrast between two models: the AA model on the one hand, and what I refer to as the Counterpublic/Collective Action (CPCA) model on the other. I then seek to determine to what
degree the structure of the race blog network bears out expectations defined by one, the other or both models.

A Race Blog Hyperlink Network

The remainder of this paper focuses on a race blog network created through page links between race blogs and a variety of other sites, principally political blogs and traditional media sites. While explanations for links between two sites vary depending on the context and type of sites, scholars agree that the act of linking has social significance. In her review of link studies De Mayer (2012) distinguishes between scholars for whom hyperlinks provide a way of understanding the overarching structure of the Web, and other scholars for whom hyperlinks are indicative of other forms of individual and collective expression.

In line with previous scholarship, I view blog links as having personal, ideological, and political significance. I take the view that blog links facilitate blogger’s identity construction, structure their affiliations with likeminded others, and signify a co-produced body of discourse (Ackland & Shorish, 2009; Adamic and Glance, 2005; Hargittai et al., 2008). The precise nature of the affiliation and conversation that takes place between linked sites, however are not a given (Thelwall, 2006) and must be theorized within some meaningful context(s) that help to explain it. Analyzing hyperlink networks thus requires both identifying linked sites and offering a theoretical explanation for the ties between them.

Thus, I analyze this race blog network within the context of the two potentially dichotomous or overlapping theoretical frameworks mentioned earlier – the social, political, and media influence framework encompassed within the AA model, and the discourse racialization, collective identity work indicative of the CPCA model.

Data Collection

I collected data using MOZ Opensite Explorer, a link analysis tool generally used for increasing site visibility.2 Upon entering a Url, the crawler identifies website pages and domains that link to that Url. It also generates a variety of metrics about the sites linking in to a particular Url. I produced the race blog network using the following process. I began with a list of sixty identifiable race blogs as initial seed sites. The resulting crawl produced a list of predominantly political blogs, mainstream media sites, and other race blogs that linked to the initial sixty race blog seed sites. I then performed a second crawl, adding to the seed list any additional race blog not included on the initial seed list, and any political blog, or traditional media site that produced three or more links to one of the initial race blog seed sites. The second crawl included a total of two hundred three seed sites, which produced 151,882 page links. This means that the crawl produced links to specific web pages, not just the site domain. Next, I significantly reduced the size of the network by page grouping the links. That is, I grouped all pages from a specific site under its site domain. For example, twenty links to twenty different pages at racialicious.com from huffingtonpost.com was reduced to a single link between the two blogs, weighted at twenty. Page grouping reduced the network from 151,882 nodes to 16,724. I significantly reduced the

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2 http://www.opensiteexplorer.org/
size of the network a final time by discarding all nodes except for the seed sites. The final network consisted of two hundred three nodes, with 1,558 links between them.

Collecting and manipulating the data in this way provides several advantages. First, using inlinks allows me not only to map the network of sites, but to also get a realistic sense of a site’s prominence within the network. Second, using page links provides a way to measure not only the connection between two sites, but also the strength of the connection – the degree that sites share content between one another. That is, using page-links allows me to weight connections between two sites based on the number of times one site links to pages on another, and vice-versa. Finally, focusing only on seed sites is an appropriate starting point for investigating the foundational relationships among race blogs in the network and between race blogs, political blogs, and traditional media. That is, focusing on and theorizing about this core element of the network will provide a basis for subsequent investigations into the full breadth of the race blog network.

Race Blogs, Political Blogs and Traditional Media

To reiterate, the network I consider does not include the entire network of race blog links. Rather, the network focuses only on the link structure and dynamics between the initial seed sites, consisting of three site categories: race blogs, political blogs, and traditional news media sites.

Race Blogs

Figure 1 displays the race blog portion of the network. This network partition consists of eighty-nine race blogs, and represents the largest proportion (44%) of the total network. Nodes are distinguished here by their racial grouping. Black-themed blogs (green) make up the largest race blog component. Asian-themed blogs (red) comprise the second largest component, followed by a handful of Latino-themed blogs (purple), and a few blogs that feature cross-racial content (blue). Figure 1 also distinguishes race blogs by indegree, the number of inlinks they receive, and is represented by the size of the node. The indegree distribution ranges from zero to eighty-one,
with a mean of six. The multi-channel site ThisWeekInBlackness.com (TWiB), which produces several blogs, a radio show, and news, ranks highest, topping by a considerable margin, the next highest-ranking site, Fieldnegro.com. AngryBlackBitch, BlackSnob, and WhatAboutOurDaughters join TWiB and FieldNegro among the most highly ranked race blog sites by in-degree. Notably, each of these sites feature content produced by and primarily for African American audiences.

Political Blogs

Figure 2 includes the portion of the network occupied by political blogs. The blogs identified here represent thirty-seven percent of the network, and are part of this network due to their links into or from one or more race blogs. Political blogs are distinguished only by indegree. A small handful of them dominate in terms of the number of links they receive from either race blogs or traditional media sites. The top five are representative of the types of blogs typically connecting to race blogs. These include top left leaning, general politics blogs (CrooksandLiers, Balloon-Juice), identity politics-focused blogs (Feministing), liberal policy interests blogs (TalkLeft) and liberal-leaning news aggregation sites (HuffingtonPost).

Traditional Media

The final partition within the race blog network consists of the small portion of traditional media sites that make up only nineteen percent of the network. Displayed in Figure 3, this portion of the network consists of a relatively even field of news media sites receiving relatively few in-links from within the network. Exceptions include TheAtlantic, a long-running political news magazine, SFGate, the online home for the San Francisco Chronicle, and NYMag, a New York-focused culture and style magazine. I categorize these traditional media sites as such because of their longevity, their availability in print and broadcast format in addition to being online, and their extensive audiences. As such, they constitute the “media elite”; they wield the most power and influence in terms of distribution potential and are the targets of the of the AA Model.

Race blogs, political blogs, and traditional news media form a clear network of relationships
through hyperlinks to and from pages on each site’s respective domains. As such, race blogs are embedded in a broader media ecology of primarily left/liberal-leaning political blogs that champion similarly ideological positions on key political and cultural issues – race and racial issues being one of them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Race Blogs</th>
<th>Political Blogs</th>
<th>P&lt;</th>
<th>Mainstream Media</th>
<th>P&lt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indegree</td>
<td>9.6 (SD=13)</td>
<td>7.3 (SD=16)</td>
<td>.319</td>
<td>3.7 (SD=11)</td>
<td>.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OutDegree</td>
<td>6.6 (SD=5)</td>
<td>8.7 (SD=6)</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>8.1 (SD=6)</td>
<td>.130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MozRank</td>
<td>4.5 (SD=2)</td>
<td>5 (SD=2)</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>6.1 (SD=1)</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain Auth.</td>
<td>50.34 (SD=20)</td>
<td>61.8 (SD=21)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>89.6 (SD=14)</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Total N</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Means Comparisons on Key Network Site Characteristics

Despite their overlap, however, a clear hierarchy exists between race blogs, political blogs and traditional news media in terms of prominence outside of this specific network. On the two general measures of site prominence provided in rows three and four of Table 1 – MozRank and Domain Authority.3 The pattern from least to greatest extends from race blogs on one end, to traditional media on the other. While the race blog network structure and dynamics is what I focus on at this point in my analysis, I take this more generalized context of site prominence into account in subsequent analyses.

Having established this key framework for understanding the networked role and function race blogs play within this online content environment, I turn my attention to understanding the specific nature of the relationship between each of these network partitions. I focus my analysis on specific hypotheses about the nature of race blogs’ relationship between other race blogs, political blogs, and traditional media outlets.

The central question I pursue moving forward is: what can the structural characteristics linking race blogs, political blogs, and traditional media in this network tell us about the position that race blogs occupy and role they play within the blogosphere and broader media and socio-political landscape? I address this central question by drawing inferences from race blogs’ link structure inasmuch as they diverge from, or are consistent with the AA or CPC models. Do race blogs simply add to the cacophony of the political blogosphere, constructed and framed by scholars as primarily an information network? Are they merely part of the masses of citizens vying for influence, aspiring to ride the coattails of higher-status political blogs and gain greater attention in traditional media? Or, does the race blog network tying race blogs to political blogs and traditional media sites suggest that something else is at work, something beyond information circulation and more consistent with forms of collective action? Do they reflect actions that sublimate desires for large-scale influence, or privilege forming collective identity development?

**Race Blogs, Collective Identity & Racialized Issue Framing**

The idea of collective framing has long underpinned theories of collective action, especially as they relate to social movement organizations, the recruitment of individual movement actors, activist mobilization, and issue framing (Benford and Snow, 2000; Klandermans, 1997; 3 [http://moz.com/help/pro/link-analysis](http://moz.com/help/pro/link-analysis)
McAdam, 1996). The presumption that race blogs are a distinct category of blog is central to my investigation into race blogs networks. This presumption also animates my dual framing of race blog linking behavior throughout my analysis as potentially related to both spheres of collective action, as well as spheres of media influence. As such, I begin by exploring – at least in a tacit way here – whether and how race blogs frame their work product – blog content – as distinctively racial in nature, compared to political blogs and traditional media sites.

To determine whether race blogs do indeed frame themselves through the lens of race, and whether they do so more than the other political blogs and traditional media sites with whom they connect, I focus on each sites’ textual descriptions using the online text extraction/analysis tool Alchemy API. Alchemy extracts a ranked list of keywords from site front pages. I extracted these keywords for each network site and then identified race-related terms included for each site. From this I developed a simple “race quotient” for each site generated by dividing the number of race terms by the total number keywords produced. I use this race quotient to measure racial salience, which is not only the presence of racial content, but the degree sites frame themselves in racial terms (see Author, 2011); the higher the quotient, the greater degree of racial salience.

The key question here is whether race blogs (who have generally been classified as political blogs) frame themselves in racial terms more than political blogs, and traditional media sites. Table 2 demonstrates that this is indeed the case. Race blogs collectively have a significantly greater race quotient; one-third of its collective front-page keywords contain race terms. This proportion is double that of traditional media sites and almost three times that of political blogs.

While limited in its scope, this racial frame analysis serves two purposes. First, the analysis establishes a measure of shared identity/interest among race blogs. Coordinated or not, each of the race blogs sites affirmatively frame their respective blogs as being racially focused, and in so doing signify a common identity around producing racially framed content. Second, the analysis draws a clear distinction between race blogs and the remaining sites within its network. Indeed, the race quotient of the least racially salient race blog is greater than the average racial salience of either political blogs or traditional media sites.

Were race blogs not significantly more racially framed, there would be little justification to study them any differently than researchers do political blogs or traditional media. Race blogs’ collective framing around race-based topics and language thus provides a specific rationale to further inquire into the ways that race blogs’ network structure exhibits characteristics of alternative publics or collective action networks, where collective identity development is

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison Groups</th>
<th>Mean Race Quotient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race Blogs</td>
<td>.34 (.16)/60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Blogs</td>
<td>.12 (.09)/53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Media</td>
<td>.17 (.12)/24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F=40, p&lt;.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>.31 (.16)/42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>.39 (.09)/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>.40 (.17)/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>.44 (.24)/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonracial</td>
<td>.13 (.10)/76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F=23, p&lt;.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Mean racial salience comparisons with standard deviations. Top Lines are comparison group.

4 [http://www.alchemyapi.com/](http://www.alchemyapi.com/)
paramount – in contrast, or perhaps, in addition to those of information networks, where matters of circulation and influence predominate.

Race Blog Link Homophily

Scholars long established that U.S. social networks tend to be homophilous (Mcpherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, 2001). This concept – that like flocks towards like – is a salient characteristic of the political blogosphere, primarily in terms of ideology (see Adamic & Glance, 2005; Hargittai, 2008; Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell, 2010). Homophily also characterizes traditional civil rights activist networks, primarily in terms of social movement organizations (see McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2008; Freidman & McAdam, 1992; Morris, 1999). The homophily principle provides a valuable construct for determining and interpreting relationships among race blogs and between race blogs, political blogs and traditional media outlets. The AA model suggests that race blogs’ link distribution will favor ties to political blogs and traditional news sites that are more established and have larger audiences. The CPCA model, however, suggests that race blogs will distribute links in accordance with principles of collective identity.

Data from this network show that race blogs are homophilous with respect to their relationship to political blogs and traditional media sites. Table 3 compares in-group/out-group linking patterns between all race blogs in the network (in-group) and all non-race blogs, including both political blogs and traditional media sites (out-group). Read row by row, race blogs’ link distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Expected # Ties</th>
<th>Observed # Ties</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>P &gt;=Diff</th>
<th>P &lt; Diff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Race Blogs/Non-Race Blogs</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Race Blogs/Race Blogs</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>464</td>
<td>-247</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race Blogs/Race Blogs</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.998</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Group Homophily: Race Blogs & Non-Race Blogs

among other race blogs and political blogs/traditional media exhibit the following pattern. Row one shows that given the opportunity structure, non-race blogs are expected to have 434 ties to other non-race blogs. However, the number of actual ties between them is 551, one hundred seventeen more than expected. The increased number of observed ties between the two groups above what would be expected by chance is a significant difference, with a p-value of .017. That is, non-race blogs link to other non-race blogs significantly more than expected. But this is only one-third of the full picture. Row two shows that the number of ties between non-race blogs and race blogs is significantly lower than expected. Finally, like non-race blogs, race blog ties to other race blogs is significantly greater than expected.

To summarize, in this network where every blog has the possibility of both linking or being linked to every other blog in the network, race blogs send and receive a greater proportion of its ties to other race blogs rather than non-race blogs – be they political blogs or traditional media sites. This represents what McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001) refer to as in-breeding.
homophily – going beyond what is afforded by the opportunity structure to connect to in-group others.

But another degree of homophily exists that runs counter to the AA model of race blogs’ link behavior. Table 4 displays the same link distribution calculations, testing the proportion of in-group/out-group links, where in-group/out-group is defined in binary fashion for Black, Latino and Asian-targeted blogs, as well as multiracial blogs. These comparisons demonstrate largely the same pattern, though they present a more complex picture compared to the previous analysis. Table 4 indicates significant, but not completely homophilous patterns for both Black and Latino-targeted blogs. For both, in-group ties are significantly greater than expected and intergroup ties are fewer than expected.

However, ties between out-groups in each instance are greater, but not significantly greater than expected. Asian-themed, and multiracial blogs are the exception to this pattern. Asian-themed blogs exhibit the completely homophilous pattern seen earlier. Multiracial blogs exhibit the complete opposite pattern, having fewer in-group and greater cross-group ties than expected (though neither of the over-under numbers are significant).

Despite the lack of significance in the surplus links between the non-Black and non-Latino sites, the pattern strongly tends towards homophily among each racial group as it did with respect to race blogs and non-race blogs. Multiracial blogs clearly depart from this pattern, and mark their position as likely mediators between race blogs and the other entities within the network.

The multilevel homophily here demonstrates two characteristics. The first level sets apart race blogs from their political blog and traditional media cohorts within the network. The way in
which homophily breaks down on the second level mirrors the structure of America’s traditional identity politics as racially demarcated communities, publics, political organizations and the like. As such, it provides support for viewing race blogs as a reflection of traditional racial-group based collective interest formation and organizing.

Race Blogs & Capital Sharing

In an economy that traffics inlinks, quality links, and – ultimately – eyeballs, websites produce and share capital through links they receive from other sites. Ultimately, sites accrue capital based on the level of site traffic they receive, which is based on the ability to be found (site visibility), typically through search engines. Capital exchange takes places via websites linking behavior, passing equity through outlinks and receiving it through inlinks. As such, measures of link capital can be used to help explain the structural connections among and between sites in the race blog network, and test whether this structure is more closely consistent with either the AA or CPCA models.

If race blogs’ linking structure is consisted with an AA model of capital sharing, they would predominantly “link up” to higher-status, higher-authority sites, which, in this network’s hierarchy, means mainstream media sites and political blogs. A capital sharing pattern more consistent with the CPCA model would show a significant degree of either downward or lateral linking. Such a pattern is consistent with collective identity formation in the form of the exchange of practical and symbolic resources characteristic of social movement organizations (Diani, 1992). I argue that such capital exchange that Ackland and O’Neil (2011) – studying environmental activist organizations – operationalize as “index authority” also applies to race blogs given the racially distinctive nature of race blogs as opposed to other blogs. That is, race blogs’ linking structure does suggest a measure of common affiliation, a kind of implicit organization that resembles the more explicit organizing that takes place among activist organizations. The exchanged capital amongst race blogs comes in the form of increased visibility, as well as a kind of self-referential solidarity. This is specifically so when looking at the linking relationship between high/low-status race blogs, which I do here using what is called the E-I (External-Internal) Index.

The E-I index measures the proportion of links that are external or internal to network partitions (groups). E-I scores range from negative one (ties all within the in-group) to one (all ties outside the group). While it is similar to the earlier homophily measures, E-I scores are calculated for whole networks, partitions, and each individual node. This makes it possible to determine and compare individual sites’ link trajectories, and allow me to measure the degree that capital sharing takes place among and between race blogs, political blogs and traditional media sites.

I’ve already established that as a whole, race blogs tend to link to other race blogs more than they do to either political blogs or traditional media sites. But does this same pattern hold when race blogs are stratified along the dimensions of stature/visibility/link reputation? That is, do higher-status race blogs break solidarity, if you will, with their race blog counterparts in favor of greater ties to political blogs and traditional media – either by linking to those sites or those sites linking to them, or both? There are three possible trajectories for high-status race blogs’ links in this scenario. High status race blogs might be completely embedded among political blogs and
traditional media sites, completely embedded among other race blogs, or occupy some median position between the two. While the first position is clearly most consistent with the AA model, both the second and third are conceivably consistent with the CPCA model. Being highly embedded among other race blogs would demonstrate a greater sense of collective affiliation, showing that despite their higher stature they share a strong common identity with other race blogs and those who produce them. This is consistent with what social capital researchers refer to as bonding social capital. The more advantageous position, however, would be the third. While being highly embedded among race blogs strengthens the “collective” attribute of the CPCA model, it would still lack the sense of being a viable counter-public if indeed there were few connections to or exchange of content between the race blog collective and the more dominant partition consisting of political blogs and traditional news media. As such, the ideal high status race blogs’ link trajectory with respect to the CPCA model would be one in which enough links are distributed towards the in-group to justify one’s affiliation as an engaged member, and enough are distributed towards the out-group, in order to be able to mediate ideas, positions, concerns, etc. between the two. In the language of social capital theory and research, high-status’ race blogs’ link distribution might follow a pattern that produces more bonding social capital (trajectory one, above) or bridging social capital (trajectory three, above) (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000)

I base race blogs’ stature on their indegree rank, which sets apart twelve race blogs. Grouping these together as high-status and the remaining race blogs as low-status, I then compare each group’s mean E-I score. This provides a general measure of whether elite, high capital race blogs distribute their links to other race blogs or other non-racial political blogs and traditional media sites. Consistent with position three mentioned above, the mean E-I scores differ significantly between low and high-status race blogs. With a mean E-I score of -.389, low-status race blogs are more inward-focused than their higher status counterparts, whose score of -.123 only marginally tends inward. Thus, while high-status race blog links do favor other race blogs, they straddle the line between race blogs and non-race blogs.

My second measure of race blogs’ fidelity to the CPCA model complicates this picture, and is based on a metric derived from MOZ, called “Domain Authority.” Domain Authority is an algorithmic measure of a domain’s probable performance in search engine rankings. Rather than looking at individual E-I scores, I divide the distribution of domain authority scores among four tiers, based on their means and standard deviations. Tier four sites have the highest domain authority score and I designate them as “elite.” I also divided sites along race blog/non-race blog lines, such that there are four tiers of race blogs, and four tiers of non-race blogs (again, including both political blogs and traditional media sites). Table 5 displays the ratio of existing to possible ties between elite race blogs and each tier of both non-race blogs and race blogs. These results are largely consistent with the high/low-status E-I scores in terms of their middle positioning. As seen in Table 4, elite race blogs share the greatest proportion of possible ties with

5 Results from Means Test, F=1.15, p<.030
6 http://moz.com/learn/seo/domain-authority
tier-2 non-race blogs (58% of total potential ties). Their second greatest share, in terms of density, is with other race blogs, however it is clear that that the preponderance of those links are to other elite race blogs (46%).

Summary & Discussion

My purpose was to consider the position race blogs/bloggers occupy and the role they play in the blogosphere and larger media landscape. I attempted to do so by theorizing race blogs’ role and position not only as content producers in a information network where site visibility and content diffusion are the primary markers of influence and value, but as potential actors in a network where shared identity and the exchange of in-group discourse necessary to facilitate collective action. The structural characteristics of the race blog network I analyze here bears out the need for this theoretical expansion.

First, race blogs distinguish themselves by their racially-framed content that, though political, is saliently framed in racial terms. Second, race blogs exhibit homophilous linking behavior, with the preponderance of their links coming from and being directed to other race blogs, more so than to political blogs or traditional media sites. Race blogs exhibit an added sense of homophily in that race blogs (multiracial blogs being the exception) are homophilous with respect to specific racial groupings – strongly so for Asian-focused blogs, moderately so for Latino-focused blogs, and a little less so for black-themed blogs. Race blogs’ collective nature is also demonstrated by their capital sharing, which exhibit some sense of collective, race-group solidarity, inasmuch as high-status race blogs share a large proportion of their ties (and the capital that comes with it) with other race blogs.

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Table 4. Tie Proportion; Elite and Lower Tier Non-Race Blogs (NRB) and Race Blogs (RB)
Though I frame my analysis as testing race blogs’ network structure in terms of its fidelity to either a CPCA as opposed to the AA model, and despite the strong consistency with the former, the evidence here points much more to a form of sophisticated and multilayered overlap rather than model exclusivity. Figure 4 represents the race blog network model consistent with the results of my analysis. It represents one network partitioned based on site type (two race blog divisions, political blogs, and traditional media sites). The first partition (to the left of the double blue arrows) includes a set of race blogs highly embedded with other race blogs, the majority of which are of comparatively low status. Direct and indirect ties connect the first partition to the second, a small cluster of higher-status race blogs that are less embedded with, but still strongly connected to other race blogs, particularly to others of high status (represented by the bubbles to the right of the double blue arrows). In a CPCA framework, partitions one and two are where the collective identity work would predominantly takes place, between highly embedded, highly racially framed discourse productions/producers with dense ties to similarly situated in-group members and ample access to higher-status, in-group member blogs. The site of overlap and interaction between partitions one and two is where the counter-public dimension of the CPCA is developed. There, highly-embedded/low-status blogs potentially engage in discourse with tacitly-embedded/high-status race blogs who bridge access to the third partition – the broader, and more authoritative sphere of political blogs. Political blogs increase attention to race blog discourse passed along to this partition, and amplify its reach and significance within the political blog sphere and potential among traditional media outlets. Race blog discourse that reaches the traditional media sphere represents the height of this potential attention and amplification.

On the one hand, race blogs are clearly and significantly set apart from the political blog partition because of their differential racial framing, and predominantly in-group link structure. On the other hand, the handful of higher status blogs maintains a large proportion of ties to the political blog partition. Given political blogs’ comparative stature above race blogs, and closer proximity to traditional media, political blogs serve the potential purpose of distributing and amplifying content produced by, or circulating within the political blog partition, including content that may originate among race blogs. While this might be the more typical trajectory, it does not preclude the possibility of direct flow from race blogs to traditional media – bypassing the political blogosphere – given that there are a few direct links between them.

This model’s benefit is two-fold. First it justifiably distinguishes race blogs as a particular type,
rather than a generalized form of blog. By shifting our analytical focus away from questions of authority and influence exclusively, we can begin to ask different questions about race bloggers/blogs (and other forms of electronically produced and circulated race based content). Principal among these is, what role do race bloggers play in the development of collective racial group identity and, more importantly, potentially mobilizing collective action? If race blogs are merely like all others, then their general balkanization within the political blogosphere is likely to be interpreted as just that – as a special class of low-status/low influence, individualized and therefore impotent discourse producers whose work is relatively inconsequential. By viewing race blogs as perhaps a central cluster in a larger network of race-based civil rights actors, however, we open up the possibility that they may play a much different and perhaps more important role in the larger sphere of race work. To be clear, the data here suggests the justification for viewing race blogs in this way, not definitive evidence that they do, something that I return to shortly as I outline specific next steps for this research.

The second benefit resulting from my analysis of the race blog network here is that it helps us to view race blogs not purely through the lens of information networks, media power and influence or that of collective action – but both, and… That is, by conceptualizing race blogs as a network where collective identity and race work takes place as a necessary condition for potential collective action, it frees us to ask questions about how the burgeoning political blogosphere can, and perhaps does, promote race-based collective action by amplifying racial discourse that may be framed largely by and consistent with the goals of race blogs/bloggers and racial justice activists more broadly. In short, I argue that conceptualizing race blogs as both distinct from, but intimately intertwined with political blog networks provides a path for better understanding both the political blogosphere as well as race-based collective action work.

Next Steps

The results of my analysis of race blogs’ network structure here adequately justifies focusing on race blogs as a specific category of blog enterprise that should be theorized within a framework that takes both counterpublic affiliation and collective action potential into account. However, it is does not produce the type and scale of evidence needed to substantiate conclusions that race blogs do indeed operate as a component of racial justice collective identity framing and action. To do this, future research will need to move in the following directions. First, new research will need to focus more expansively on the content produced by race blogs/bloggers. This will be crucial to more rigorously determining whether race blogs significantly differ from others in terms of setting and sustaining a racial agenda. That is, do race blogs produce discourse about racial issues with greater frequency and depth than political blogs and traditional media? Further, when race blogs, political blogs, and traditional media do converge on similar racial issues, do race blogs frame them differently – offering new insight, unvoiced critiques and the like?

Second, research will need to view and analyze race blog networks dynamically. Conceiving of race blogs as potential sites that may support and even facilitate racial justice collective organizing and action requires both the flexibility of a dynamic network (Benkler, 2011; Bennett & Sergerberg, 2012) that might incorporate new and temporary agents, and a persistent network structure that binds race blogs to each other and builds bridges out to other sites in ways outlined by the model I specified above. These ties to and paths between race blogs and other sites would
need to be maintained and even grow, both in number and strength if they can be considered as potential breeding grounds for political mobilization.

Third, future research will need to look more closely at how content diffuses among race blogs and how it further propagates beyond them. If we are to view race blogs as a viable counter public and actors spurring racial justice organizing and action, then there must be evidence that racial discourse does circulate within its relatively closed sphere. There must be evidence that race bloggers do share content, debate points of view, and collectively think through issues and ideas. There must also be evidence that the outcomes of such ruminations among race blogs do get distributed through more expansive networks. This leads to the final direction for future research, which is the necessity to view the more expansive network of affiliations, alliances and flows among actors in the race blog network. This includes the degree to which race blogs/bloggers connect to other traditional components of racial justice action networks – from traditional and new social movement organizations, to local, state and federal politicians and political interest groups that champion racial justice issues, academic institutions where knowledge about these issues are produced, and legal actors who intervene to shape the trajectories and outcomes of racial justice actions. If race blogs do indeed further the goals of racial justice organizing and collective actions one would expect these associations and alliances to be visible in their network structure – particularly (though not necessarily exclusively) in the domain of cyberspace where the majority of their work gets produced and disseminated.
Bibliography


