"A Belief in Humanity is a Belief in Colored Men:" Using Culture to Span the Digital Divide

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Building on Harrison and Zappen’s (2003) contention that technologies are infused with the values and social goals of their creators, I argue that Web content reproduces existing norms, rules, and power relations, some of which may prove inimical to Black identity, culture, and information needs. To explore this claim, I construct a culture-specific framework based on W. E. B. DuBois’ analysis of race and racism in the United States, that is then used as an evaluation schema for web content in the form of images, links, and text on mainstream Web sites vis-à-vis Africana.com. The results of the analysis uncover basic cultural differences in the design of and responses to mainstream and African-American sites.

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Introduction

In 1995, the U.S. National Telecommunications and Information Administration commissioned the Census Bureau to survey computer owners (NTIA, 1995). One highly publicized finding was that African-Americans lagged behind Whites in both computer equipment ownership and telephone service—a situation eventually dubbed the “Digital Divide.” From this initial focus on computer ownership, digital divide research has shifted to Internet access (NTIA, 1998, 1999, 2000) and from there to whether skills affect Internet usage (Bucy, 2000; Foster, 2000; Hargittai, 2002; Lenhart, 2003; NTIA, 2002; Warshauer, 2002). The most recent NTIA study (2004) focuses again on Internet access, looking at differences in broadband penetration according to demographic categories.

In this article, I argue that the paucity of Internet content relevant to Black interests may have more to do with the slower Internet adoption rates of Blacks than with current formulations of technological or information illiteracy. Digital divide researchers articulating deficiency models of the divide (e.g., lower skill levels or higher illiteracy rates of minorities) are not seeing the entire picture. Selwyn (2003) explains that digital divide formulations rely on the assumption that information...
and communication technology (ICT) usage is desirable and beneficial for everyone. Selwyn’s argument, which I seek to extend here, is that people might not be using the Internet because there is no perceived social benefit in doing so. Building on Harrison and Zappen’s (2003) contention that technologies are infused with the values and social goals of their creators, I argue that Web content reproduces existing norms, rules, and power relations—some of which may prove inimical to Black identity, culture, and information needs. To explore this claim, I construct a culture-specific framework that is then used as an evaluation schema for Web content in the form of images, links, and text. This examination is conducted with the goal of determining whether mainstream/commercial Web sites provide material relevant to the information needs and desires of the African-American community.

If we consider the Internet from a material access perspective, it is not farfetched to assume a correlation between economic development and Internet service provision. After all, Internet infrastructure is hugely expensive, such that only the more prosperous nations and/or metropolitan areas have enough capital to finance and maintain it. We can then speculate that Internet content will be developed to appeal to those who can best afford the service. Foster (2000) and Morkes and Nielsen (2003) argue that a lack of information relevant to a user’s needs drives the user to satisfy those needs elsewhere. Accordingly, Hoffman, Novak, and Schlosser (2000) suggest that African-Americans use the Internet less because it provides relatively little information suited to their needs. Even when information is provided, Lazarus and Lipper (2000) maintain that cultural factors such as ethnicity and race may affect Internet users’ trust or mistrust of a particular source, tone of language, or visual style.

One way to assess content relevance is to evaluate it through a cultural framework. Does the content meet cultural values, expectations, and needs? For mainstream America, the answer would appear to be yes. African-American culture, however, has content needs that mainstream Web sites often do not meet (Kretchmer & Carveth, 2001). Web content, which draws heavily on print and broadcast media content, tends to reproduce and disseminate information about and for African-Americans in ways that can be deficient, demeaning, and/or stereotypical. There is little Internet content reflecting cultural diversity—whether generated by ethnic communities themselves, or designed around their unique cultural practices and interests (Lazarus & Lipper, 2000).

Harrison and Zappen (2003) suggest that information and communication technologies be evaluated in terms of the values they articulate. Through a reading of W.E.B. DuBois’ philosophy of the Black experience in America, in this article I synthesize an African-American cultural framework based on DuBois’ careful thought about the fundamental nature of his world, the grounds for human knowledge, and the evaluation of human conduct. I then operationalize one of his propositions for a preliminary analysis of two Web sites—one mainstream, one targeted at Black users—in order to evaluate whether they meet DuBois’ ideas of what may be relevant to the Black community, as well as whether this cultural
framework approach has the potential to be productive in CMC research. In this, I am following Chatman’s (1996) imperative that information science research on other populations should begin by looking at those populations’ social environments and define information from their perspective. Thus, this article is primarily concerned with the construction of a coherent content-evaluation framework based on historical, sociological, and philosophical observations of the African-American experience.

The Internet as an Object of Study

Information is not neutral; it has value based on its relevance to the cultural and social orientation of the recipient. Social and cultural values and behaviors are articulated through information. Values are discursive; that is, we exchange and reinforce values through discourse between individuals or between individuals and institutions. In addition to improving the speed and reach of communication between social entities, information and communication technologies serve a secondary social function. They allow the transmission of the thoughts, ideas, and beliefs of the content creator and encourage varying degrees of interactive feedback on those concepts from technologically enabled participants. Thus it is possible that the ideological dimension of information (and thus of Internet content) can serve as a barrier to participation, even if the participants possess the required technological tools. Mehra, Merkel, and Bishop (2004) contend that the goals, expectations, and identification of what marginalized users consider to be meaningful in their everyday life are important factors contributing to their use (or non-use) of the Internet.

Mitra and Cohen (1999) argue that the entire Internet is a discourse, more than just a host to listservs, Macromedia Flash sites, and streaming video. They position the Internet to be “read” as a text presenting information that 1) expresses the identity and cognition of the authors, and 2) attracts like-minded others. Mitra and Cohen maintain that Internet users, confronted with authoritative sources that represent them negatively or not at all, have the freedom to resist that authority by navigating away through hyperlinks. They can then take advantage of the open nature of Internet architecture to create information that speaks more directly to their worldview and needs.

This is a problematic solution, however. As Selwyn (2003) noted, we should not simply consider ICTs in terms of “use” or “not use.” Starting from the concept of relevance, Chatman (1996) proposes that the introduction of new knowledge relies on the relevance of that information in response to everyday problems and concerns. Is an information need the same priority as a housing need, or a childcare need? Although some Blacks possess the leisure time and financial wherewithal to spend time and money on the creation of Internet content, many more do not. As Chatman (1996) points out, new information often has too high of a cost to be useful in the daily lives of poor people. Therefore, it is not a question of “use” or “not use;” a plethora of information about oenology and varietal wines may have little relevance for a parent looking for affordable childcare.
Creating new Web sites is not always the optimal solution for many Black Internet users. One reason is cost. Less well-sponsored Web sites—like those prominently featuring “ethnic” content—may flourish for some time, especially if they offer high quality content that persuades readers that the site is trustworthy, authentic, and attention-worthy. However, unless ethnic Web sites can translate those qualities into the financial capital needed to pay for complex equipment and quality staff, they either go out of business, or are merged into larger Web sites (Ross, 2000). Moreover, although the open nature of the World Wide Web and a growing number of free (advertising-sponsored or open source) tools are encouraging greater numbers of Internet users to create their own content, these activities are still expensive in terms of time and energy. Focusing on content creation (as opposed to democratization of existing content) allows the cultural and social inequities of Web content to continue unchecked.

Where can Blacks see the beliefs and knowledge of their cultural group represented on the Internet? They can choose between Web sites that specifically address them through cultural content, or Web sites that marginally reference them as users and consumers; they rarely get the chance to do both. While Black Web sites are better at offering content designed for their intended audiences, unless operators of such sites can convince deep-pocketed investors to maintain and update them, such sites are likely to fail or to be absorbed into larger Web sites. Whether their Web destinations fail or are absorbed, Black Internet users end up with fewer sources of culturally specific content, consistent with Hoffman et al.’s (2000) contention that Blacks have trouble finding content specifically suited to their needs.

A more practical suggestion for Black Internet users seeking information relevant to their lifestyle and needs would be to urge content providers to be more considerate of the Black community. There is precedent here; there are usability standards intended to allow people with disabilities, for example, greater access to Internet content. However, Lazarus and Lipper (2000) note that despite the proliferation of evaluation guidelines for Web content over the last few years, there are few evaluation frameworks available to assess the cultural suitability of Internet content. Moreover, the commercial orientation of the World Wide Web seems to preclude developing sites focused on ethnic/cultural content unless there is money to be made from them, a practice known as information redlining (Anderson & Melchior, 1995, cited in Hoffman et al., 2000).

It is important to consider Internet content from the same critical perspective from which we should examine offline content. The attitudes and ideologies about African-Americans found offline are often reproduced and disseminated in Internet content. Miller and Slater (2000) argue that

we need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness. (Let’s Not Start From There section, para. 5)

If we start from this point, then there is another element of Internet use to consider. Because the Internet is embedded in our physical world, on the one hand
we interact with it as we would with any other artifact, making use of practices drawn from our perceptions, behaviors, and beliefs. On the other hand, we use the Internet in ways that are defined by the technology and the content available (Nakamura, 2002). We can see the Internet as the present-day manifestation of W.E.B. DuBois’ musings on the paradox of double-consciousness: He argued that the Black man exists in a world “which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (1903, p. 4).

Mainstream information channels have a long history of ignoring the existence of Blacks or portraying them in derogatory or stereotypical fashion. Blacks, like members of other ethnic/racial groups, derive pleasure from “seeing reflections of themselves” in certain media portrayals of Black life (Davis & Gandy, 1999). The negative imagery of Blacks found in media and discourse influences the redistribution of resources in ways that benefit dominant groups at the expense of those so depicted (Bell, 1993; Davis & Gandy, 1999; McIntosh, 1998; Morrison, 1993). The benefits of negatively depicting Blacks are not solely fiduciary, but also accrue to the self-esteem and identity of the dominant group. For all of the negativity towards Blacks found in the media, however, there are modes of resistance available to Blacks, such as publishing their own newspapers and periodicals. Other, less intensive forms of resistance include escaping television programs by changing the channel with the remote, or clicking on a hyperlink to leave a Web site (Mitra & Watts, 2002).

Viewing the Internet as a discourse means that we can interrogate it for its articulation of values relevant to the communities it serves. We have moved past much of the technophilic hype (and Luddite fear) surrounding the Internet to realize that it is an interactive social space—whether one’s vision of interactivity is one-on-one or multiple user spaces or vast commercial Web sites. Culture is the invisible glue that holds those social spaces together; the encoding and decoding that produces artifacts and makes meanings accessible. Hofstede (1997) states that culture is neither human nature nor individual personality; instead, it is the collective programming of minds distinguishing the members of one group of people from another. This is most evident when cultures clash, but it is still present when cultures are camouflaged behind “color-blind” discourse.

Culture is also the convergence of social, political, and economic contexts in which people act and which shape people’s expressions. Meehan (2001) adds that culture is what people do to express meaning. Where are African-Americans represented in the values of cybertulture? If cybertulture is indeed American culture, as Agre (2002) suggests, where do African-Americans fit into the World Wide Web? Despite the perceived dominance of Blacks in certain art forms, they still exist on the fringes of American society. Hall maintains that Black culture is constituted from two directions at once: a selective appropriation, incorporation, and rearticulation of European ideologies, cultures, and institutions alongside an African heritage (1992, p. 28). How do Web sites imagine and represent this hybrid creation? This is the third dimension of the digital divide; it appears that Web sites only represent African-American culture 1) if that is their express purpose, or 2) for commercial benefit.
(i.e., targeting African-Americans as consumers). As yet, however, we lack a methodology for determining whether a site—whether commercial or noncommercial—is espousing values that are relevant to the Black community.

**DuBois on Black Culture**

In order to discuss Internet culture one must understand the contextual influences of the cultures that created the technology and the discourses that surround it. The same is true of Black culture; one must understand the contextual influences of the culture that has influenced it so heavily. Tal (1996) states that the struggle of African-Americans to be American and Black is precisely the struggle to integrate identity and multiplicity. Questions about identity and the culture of simulation that drives cyberculture studies, but that are still largely invisible in library and information science (Honma, 2005), were addressed by African-American critical theorists at the beginning of the 20th century. W.E.B. DuBois is one of the most highly regarded American cultural critics; the strength of his assessment of Black culture lies in his understanding of American culture.

DuBois understood how much of the American culture was dependent upon and yet contemptuous of its Black citizens. DuBois realized that slavery’s ideological justification is at the heart of American culture. It is an ideology based on social control through discrimination and insult with one purpose: the elevation of one particular group over others (Blacks, American Indians, Asians (including Southeast Asia), Hispanics, and Pacific Islanders). This elevation bestowed not only social capital, but also political and economic capital, upon those so elevated.

For DuBois, Black culture begins from the contradiction of being black and American. In *Souls of Black Folk*, he introduces the theory of “double consciousness” (1904, p. 3), which describes how Blacks must struggle to maneuver daily through a society that barely considers them human or grants them any self-consciousness. In *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), DuBois observed that Blacks have their own culture, practices, and beliefs. The social heritage of slavery provides a common kinship for displaced Africans regardless of differences in skin color, social class, economic standing, or religious belief. Some of these practices remained from faintly remembered African origins: language, music, art, cuisine, and kinship patterns. Others arose from the collision with, and forced assimilation into, American culture. The Black community built their identity through memories of the difficulties of living in America, and in realizing that oppression and discrimination still exist. Although crime, disease, and poverty were (and are) overwhelmingly present in their communities, Blacks were aware on many levels that these conditions could be attributed to the neglect, discriminatory practices, or deliberate oversight of the institutions that prevented these conditions for the wider community (DuBois, 1940).

DuBois asserted that Black culture is American in that it is as critical (if not more so) of Black culture. Many Blacks criticize members of their own culture, using mainstream ideals and standards, to categorize [other] Blacks as one undifferentiated
low-class mass, lacking in culture, refinement, and education (DuBois, 1940). DuBois wrote, “It [Black criticism] tends often to fierce, angry, contemptuous judgment of nearly all that Negroes do, say, and believe” (1940, p. 180). This self-criticism is even more trenchant because many Blacks did not conform to the stereotypes unfairly applied to them by mainstream culture, yet pasted these stereotypes onto their own peers.

Most importantly for DuBois, Black culture was conditioned by the concepts that Blacks held about Whites, while at the same time, Blacks struggled against an existence dependent upon the concepts Whites held about them (DuBois, 1940). Black culture differs from American culture in that its members are hyperaware of (and frequently subjected to) innumerable sociocultural constraints against their accumulation of wealth and the enjoyment of property rights that are available to the mainstream culture. DuBois remarked, “I began to see that the cultural equipment attributed to any people depended largely on who estimated it” (1940, p. 99). DuBois often remarked upon his desire to be both black and American without being judged as failing to meet the standards of either (1940, p. 135).

**DuBois on White Culture**

DuBois believed that “the most important thing in the life of an American Negro today and the only thing that adequately explains his success, failures and foibles” was White culture (1940, p. 140). He unequivocally stated that White culture equated with American culture. At the same time, the average, reasonable, conscientious White American faces a continual paradox because of the existence of the Negro (1940, p. 153). The White man has to balance the democratic ideal of America and the love for all men taught by Christianity on the one hand, while learning folklore and custom that taught him those Blacks were to be feared, hated, and kept under control, on the other hand. Moreover, capitalism, with its fierce hunger for labor, provides Whites with three things: a comfortable standard of living, a mechanism for social control, and a justification for domination not only of Blacks, but of the poor as well.

DuBois, as noted earlier, believed that the social heritage of slavery is the common bond among people of African descent in the Americas. This social heritage is not one-sided, however. It also provided a bond among Whites that justified social control of Blacks, as well as discriminatory practices and beliefs that reified White group identity. People subscribing to this ideology did not consider Blacks part of the human race, much less American (DuBois, 1940, p. 96). Blacks could not act in any fashion without first taking into account the reaction of the White world. DuBois wrote that his means of income, his household, where he ate, or with whom he socialized could only happen through the sufferance of White society—a society from which he was largely excluded (1940).

Membership in the dominant social group can be expressed as privilege or immunity and thus becomes valuable. In America, White privilege is a valuable
commodity that may include overt expressions of racism, but that invariably includes more subtle social sanctions against out-groups and benefits for in-group members. DuBois understood that although White supremacy is often unacknowledged by Whites unless they feel threatened, it is a primary influence on their perception of the behavior of Blacks. Whiteness is defined as a binary against Black behavior, stereotypes, and appearance. To be White is to be normal, or human. To maintain social stature, Whites (and by extension, America) must be unafraid to be authoritarian and the stern disciplinarian of those who are deemed inferior.

DuBois’ observations of White culture reveal a political and cultural structure that normalizes the socioeconomic position and privilege of one group over others. This structure includes embedded cultural practices that rationalize discrimination to protect the social capital of the majority group; these discriminations range from outright racism to the subtle yet pervasive invisibility of minorities in institutional settings. Cultural privilege and discrimination manifest themselves in discourse, particularly those discourses disseminated through institutions. Norms and behaviors can be displayed or significantly omitted through the transmission of information through media such as the Internet. As Kvasny and Truex (2000) point out, the cultural factors that surround technology adoption often reify existing patterns of domination. To the extent that cultural values are transmitted through Internet content, we can draw on DuBois’ observations about Black and White culture to evaluate Internet content.

A Philosophy of the Black Experience in America

From DuBois’ assessments of Black culture and White culture, it is possible to synthesize a Black-American philosophy, as summarized below. The propositions are drawn from DuBois’ observations about the ideals and concepts integral to Black existence in America.

**Proposition 1.** Blacks are full members of the human race (DuBois, 1903, 1940).

**Proposition 2.** Blacks are fully enfranchised citizens of the United States (DuBois, 1903, 1940).

**Proposition 3.** Black culture can be representative of American culture, oppositional to American culture, or both (DuBois, 1903, 1940).

**Proposition 4.** The Black-American community coalesces around the recognition of the struggle against historical discrimination and an understanding that discrimination against the Black community still exists (DuBois, 1940).

**Proposition 5.** Institutional discrimination, in varying degrees, is a fact of life for all Blacks at some point in life, regardless of economic status or social standing (DuBois, 1940).

Taken as a group, these statements may seem self-evident. Who would argue with them, given that it is socially unacceptable to openly espouse racist discourse in this
day and age? Nonetheless, I would argue that DuBois’ most quoted statement: “The problem of the twentieth century is the color line” still holds true, albeit using different signifiers. The rules of today’s “color-blind” discourse have changed, but the fundamental objective has not. Those changes can be seen in the ways in which race is discussed and portrayed, on- and offline.

It is important to emphasize at this point that these propositions are in no way intended to represent a monolithic version of the African-American community. We have not yet addressed class, patriarchy, sexism, heterosexism, or gender—all of which shape American and African-American culture in similar and different ways. Neither will the evocation of these principles suddenly grant “cultural competence” to those who are not members of that community. I have framed DuBois’ writings in this way to articulate a somewhat different set of values from the ones attributed to Blacks in mainstream American media discourse or on the Web. While the Internet is perfectly capable of hosting domains where these values can shape the available content, such domains are rare. Rather, mainstream sites achieve that status by appropriating limited representations of African-Americans.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) research seeks to understand how and why people communicate online. While computer interfaces may differ, text is usually the visible residue of participant interactions. CMC researchers use discourse analysis to examine patterns of interaction in order to link them to social behaviors (Herring, 2004). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines how power and dominance are enacted, reproduced, and resisted in discourse according to properties of social interaction and structure. Elements of critical discourse analysis in CMC can be found in the work of Herring (1999), Selfe and Selfe (1994), Shade (1998), and Yates (1996).

Critical discourse analysis proceeds from the following premises:

- Power relations are discursive.
- Discourse constitutes society and culture.
- Discourse does ideological work.
- Discourse is historical.
- The link between text and society is mediated.
- Discourse is a form of social action.
- Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory (Van Dijk, Ting-Toomey, Smitherman, & Troutman, 1997, p. 146).

In everyday life, language users speak as members of many discourse groups; these groups can be considered to “act” by the actions of their members. These individual social acts are constitutive of higher-level social processes. Critical discourse analysis highlights the presence of a discursive strategy of “Us” versus
“Them;” positive self-presentation of the dominant in-group and negative other-presentation of the out-group (Van Dijk et al., 1997). This polarization is expressed and reproduced at all levels of text and talk, characterizing shared social representations, social cognitions, and ideologies.

In discourse, power can be defined as the ability to 1) control the flow of communication, and 2) influence the way people think and thus act. Institutions are of enormous interest for critical discourse analysts because of their control over both the context and structures of communication. CDA can be used to focus on power abuse, or the ways control over discourse is employed to subvert people’s beliefs and actions against their own best interests (or will) and for the benefit of dominant groups. Van Dijk et al. (1997) highlight some of the ways in which societal-level discourses influence people:

- By emanating from authoritative, trustworthy sources (which do not include minorities or women). In many situations, there are no alternative sources to provide a counterpoint.
- In situations where the person can only receive information, not interact with it or even offer a critique.
- The recipients may not have the knowledge or experience needed to mount a challenge to the information (1997, p. 152).

To summarize, CDA argues that social attitudes and behavior are visibly represented in textual discourse. It does so by linking the discourse of institutions or individuals to larger, group-centered social processes of control, dominance, and inequity. It also allows us to fulfill Selwyn’s (2003) entreaty that we view technology as text and technology users as readers and interpreters. This approach is agency oriented; it allows us to assume that technology users interpret how technology is to be used on their own terms, while being bounded by structural factors. This approach gives us insight into the beliefs and emotions driving the words, metaphors, and images people see on the monitor as they peruse their Web selections.

**Reading Between the Lines**

In order to determine whether Internet content includes and addresses Black culture, I conducted a pilot study on a mainstream Web site using a successful Black Web site as a control. I was hoping to find cultural content that represents the beliefs, values, practices, and rituals of African American cultural identity. Such content might operate as a counternarrative to the racial identity European-Americans constructed and imposed on Blacks, in ways that are often subversive or responsive. Finally, it might address the negotiation between these two identities through the repertoires of style, orality/musicality, and the physical (Hall, 1992, p. 27). I envisioned this content evaluation as being similar to applying the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) guidelines for Web site design, or the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium)
standards for usability, whereby a set of values are applied to web content in order to
determine whether certain populations are properly represented.

To represent mainstream discourse, I selected the United States English version
of the Yahoo! portal, which is one of the most popular destinations on the Web,
claiming over 225 million subscribed users. According to Nielsen/NetRatings (2005),
in February 2005 Yahoo! was the premier web destination, serving over 93 million
unique visitors. I chose Africana.com to represent Black discourse on the Internet.3
Africana.com, perhaps due to its affiliation with Henry Louis Gates and other prom-
inent Black intellectuals, receives consistent acclaim for its content. Both Yahoo! and
Africana.com offer significant amounts of news, sports, entertainment, lifestyle, and
editorial content. I retrieved archived versions of both sites from the Internet Archive
Wayback machine at http://www.archive.org/web/web.php. The most recently ar-
chived page for Africana.com available was December 29, 2003, so I also selected a
Yahoo! home page from the same time period.

Proposition One was used as a test case to evaluate the values presented by the
content on Yahoo! and Africana.com. Proposition One states that “Blacks are full
members of the human race.” DuBois also elaborated some observations based on
this premise; I list them below as corollaries. A coding category was devised for
each corollary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corollary</th>
<th>NOTDEVIANT</th>
<th>DEVIANT</th>
<th>BLACKBEAUTY</th>
<th>CULTUREPOOR</th>
<th>NORMWHITE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Portrayals of Blacks should not</td>
<td>Blacks are not portrayed as deviants.</td>
<td>Blacks are portrayed as deviants.</td>
<td>Black art and culture are legitimate forms of expression.</td>
<td>Black art or culture are poor copies of American culture.</td>
<td>White culture will receive the most positive representation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>focus solely on instances of deviance from societal norms, e.g., poverty, criminality, sexuality, literacy.</td>
<td>(DuBois 1903, p. 9)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1903, p. 89)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1903, p. 5)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks are considered to be criminal, hypersexual, violent, poor, lazy, and unintelligent.</td>
<td>(DuBois 1903, p. 9)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1903, p. 89)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1903, p. 5)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black standards of beauty and art emphasize the finer qualities of Blackness.</td>
<td>(DuBois 1903, p. 5)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1903, p. 89)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1903, p. 5)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black standards of beauty and art reflect a corrupt or primitive version of Western values.</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White people and White culture is overwhelmingly presented as the norm.</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
<td>(DuBois 1940, p. 142)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTDEVIANT and DEVIANT revolve around the presentation of Blacks as
normal human beings. If Blacks are presented on the Web site in a way that conforms
to societal norms associated with deviance, I coded for DEVIANT. NOTDEVIANT
covers the presentation of Blacks who are not involved in deviant acts, but it also
includes situations where blacks are correctly depicted despite the fact that they may
fall outside of societal norms. This highlights an important point: One should not fall into the dichotomous and ultimately limiting position of asserting that Blacks must only be presented as good people and never as bad people. As DuBois (1940) pointed out, there are people in the Black community who are criminals, lazy, uneducated—just as there are in the White community. A true understanding of the humanity of Black men and women would acknowledge this: Media (and thus accepted social) representations of Black people tend to highlight only the bad parts of the Black community. The nonexclusiveness of the corollaries/coding categories highlights the difficulty in holding to this position.

I evaluated each hyperlinked line of text or hyperlinked image found on both Web pages. When I encountered hyperlinks where the content was unclear, I clicked on the hyperlink to read the material the link referenced. However, the categories and content rely on sensitivity to overt and covert discourse situations referring to Blacks and Black culture; thus it is possible that with coders who are unfamiliar with the ways in which modern discourses refers to Blackness, coding decisions may vary.

The last corollary and coding category for White cultural norms was added after an initial pass through the data. I realized the need to articulate more clearly the normative position occupied by Whiteness. Going through the data again and coding for NORMWHITE yielded more information, as many of the links that could not be coded for deviance or cultural standards of beauty (e.g., because the coding categories were too specific to be relevant to the hyperlink’s information) could be coded as to whether they marked the default presence of Whites and White culture.

Coding Yahoo!
The Yahoo portal’s Web page is composed primarily of textual hyperlinks; on the day the page was downloaded for analysis, only 5% of the links were images. Many of the text hyperlinks were one word titles designed to lure the site visitor deeper into the Web site. Some of the features of the site (Mail, Games, Personals) require the user to register as a member of the Web site. These feature links were often coded as INCONCLUSIVE because they did not refer to race or cultural interests; for instance, Mail, which appeared four times, was coded as INCONCLUSIVE. Personals was also coded as INCONCLUSIVE, despite the fact that the feature is designed for people to find other people like themselves with regard to personality, race, age, and other characteristics, because the label itself does not indicate any race-related information. That part of the Yahoo! site deserves its own, more detailed analysis.

As befits its status as a popular, mainstream destination, nearly 75% of the Yahoo! hyperlinks were coded as INCONCLUSIVE, due, in part, to the lack of annotation for the links. Of the remaining inconclusive hyperlinks, many were so coded because no references were available to the pages that were originally linked. The Yahoo! links yielding the most relevant information were images featuring White entertainers and links specifically referencing artists by name. Most such links were coded NORMWHITE, as only one hyperlink listed a Black artist or entertainer.
Coding Africana.com

Africana’s Web site is designed differently from Yahoo!. An immediately apparent difference was the richness of the hyperlink-as-information channel; a majority of the hyperlinks was annotated by nonhyperlinked text. These annotations were often used as a guide to the orientation of the hyperlink in coding. For instance, a section listing editorials and op-ed content listed not only the title of the piece, but the author. This also happened in the section “Open Source,” where users are invited to contribute articles found on the web. The articles themselves were hyperlinked, as well as the member profiles of the persons who submitted them. The articles also featured the source, date on which the article was submitted, and a brief blurb orienting the reader to the article’s content.

As a result, the Africana coding was markedly different from the coding of the Yahoo! site. Some of the difference can be attributed to the Web site’s orientation to Black culture, but the presence of annotations also provided helpful information that reduced the number of INCONCLUSIVE codings, in particular. The NORMWHITE category was used here as well, although nearly half of the hyperlinks found were coded negatively, meaning that they did not preeminently feature Whites or White culture as a norm. Ten percent of the hyperlinks were coded positively for NORMWHITE. The categories for DEVIAN and CULTUREPOOR, which featured mainstream perspectives on Blacks and Black culture, were evenly split between inconclusive results and negative results. The categories for NOTDEVIAN (50%) and BLACKBEAUTY (48%) registered positive for nearly half of the hyperlinks.

Results and Discussion

The results of the comparison of the two Web portals are summarized in Table 1. The Africana.com results are consistent with the hypothesis that sites specifically designed for Black Internet users contain more Black cultural content. For Africana.com, the representation of Blackness as a norm rather than an aberration provides an indication of the Web site creators’ and content providers’ attitudes towards their audience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yahoo!</th>
<th>Africana.com</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NormWhite</td>
<td>Blackbeauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Coding results
Accordingly, it is interesting to note that some of the linked content was critical of African-American personalities and activities—a situation previously noted by DuBois. Because Blacks face continual pressure to assimilate into mainstream society (and its norms) while at the same time constantly negotiating beliefs and practices designed to exclude them from mainstream society, many African-Americans exercise “fierce, angry, contemptuous judgment of nearly all that Negroes do, say, and believe” (DuBois 1940, p. 179). This negative commentary yields ironic echoes of mainstream discourse on the habits and perceived shortcomings of African-Americans, thus supporting the appearance that African-American culture is inseparable from American culture.

Nevertheless, the majority of content found on Africana.com represents Blacks positively in terms of the amount of screen area, text, and imagery that the site dedicates to content directed towards African-American life and worldview. This was not possible on the Yahoo! Web site, in as much as the Yahoo! main page displays only the most general indicators of what content lies within. Without a deeper investigation of the links available on the main page, no conclusions can be drawn about their cultural significance or that of the material to which they link. One can speculate that the cultural inscrutability of the Yahoo! home page suggests that the site designers have a generic audience in mind, rather than a culturally specific audience. This is borne out by the presence of hyperlinks at the bottom of the page leading to culturally labeled Yahoo! portals for Chinese-speaking and Spanish-speaking Americans, suggesting that the default audience for the site is White Americans.

Future Research
In future research, I plan to examine in greater detail a larger number of Black-oriented and mainstream Web sites in order to test the propositions derived from DuBois’ principles more fully. There is much work to be done on the framework to incorporate discussions of gender, class, sexuality, sexism, masculinity, and patriarchy. For example, portrayals of Black women and Black men differ significantly on the Web; the framework should acknowledge those differences.

The evaluative framework presented here should also be fleshed out through surveys of African-Americans, both Internet users and non-Internet users. Hofstede (1997, p. 9) commented that the values people profess should be considered both for what is desirable and what is desired. A truthful representation of Black culture, however, should show Blacks in all aspects of their daily lives—not only the positive ones. The theoretical constructs could be shaped by the input from the African-American community, as well as by observation and further refinement of the theory behind the model. Eventually, this model might be codified into a Web development model for the inclusion of Black African-American values in Web content, similar to the ADA guidelines for Web design.

Other Black-oriented Web sites should be evaluated to see whether they operate according to DuBois’ principles, and if not, to incorporate additional observations
into the evaluative framework. It is also possible that content on existing Black-oriented Web sites could be identified that could be bolstered to better serve the Black community. Other mainstream Web sites should be evaluated for Black cultural relevance as well—sites such as Fox News, MSN.com, various journalistic and literary Web sites, and federal and state government Web sites. Finally, using DuBois to construct a culturally specific content framework could serve as a model to build evaluative cultural frameworks based on thorough readings of cultural critiques and surveys of other cultural groups.

This article was not intended to demonstrate that mainstream Web sites are racist or exclusive enclaves of White privilege. Rather, it is a response, in part, to Selwyn’s (2004) call for research into:

- how people’s ICT access, engagement, and outcomes pattern according to individual factors, and
- what other mitigating factors and circumstances can be identified as having an impact on different social groups’ propensity and motivations to engage with ICT.

With regard to the latter, the commercial and ideological orientations of Web site providers and content creators lead them to espouse values that are most relevant to their own worldviews; these values simultaneously construct and constrain their imagined, potential audiences (McDonough, 1999). Consistent with the lack of ethnic diversity in the information technology field (Fallows, 2000), African-American concerns and informational needs are not highly valued by content providers and commercial interests. This has larger implications, not only for the use of ICTs by African-Americans, but for their status in society. As Bobo (1992) writes, the way a group of people is represented can play a determining role in how those people are treated (and act) socially and politically.

This study is a first attempt to construct an evaluative cultural framework for assessing Internet content as informed by research into the digital divide (Jones, 1999; Kvasny, 2005; Lazarus & Lipper, 2000; Mehra et al., 2004; Selwyn, 2003; Sterne, 1999). The proposed DuBoisian framework is intended to assess whether cultural content is available to Blacks in much the same way that one might evaluate an English-only Web site for its usability by Spanish-only speakers. Eventually, once mainstream content providers become aware of the differences in how Blacks perceive and use information, the content side of the digital divide can begin to narrow.

Notes

2. The terms “Black” and “African-American” are used interchangeably in this article to refer to African-Americans in the United States.
3. This site was purchased by AOL Time Warner in January 2005.
References


### About the Author

André Brock is a Ph.D. candidate at the Graduate School for Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. His research interests include African-American culture, rhetoric of technology, and cybersculture studies.

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