
BOOK REVIEW

WHITEWASHING THE WEB: A REVIEW ESSAY

Cyber Racism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on Civil Rights, by Jessie Daniels. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009, 274 pages, \$28.95 Paper. ISBN: 978-0742561588.

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In *Cyber Racism*, Jessie Daniels (2009) shows how white supremacy has evolved from print media to the digital age. Contrary to the common stereotype that white supremacists are “backwoods hillbillies” who are technologically illiterate, Daniels effectively shows how white supremacists have used electronic communication to further spread politically-motivated racial agendas. Some of the emerging issues addressed in *Cyber Racism* include globalized white supremacy, the formation of “translocal” whiteness, state conflicts regarding hate speech regulation on the web, and cloaked white supremacist websites that epistemologically challenge common knowledge about racial matters. This book helps fill a literary absence, as the intersection of white supremacy in the digital era remains largely unexplored by race and digital scholars alike.

Daniels begins by challenging the idea that the Internet is a democratized forum and a race-neutral space. She contends that the Internet is socially embedded with the very same political struggles that pervade everyday “noncyber” life. Moreover, the Internet constitutes fertile ground for social movements of white supremacy to take root in a global context. Geography no longer presents the same obstacles it once did to prevent collective mobilization. The web provides a forum where individuals from across the world can participate in white supremacy. As Daniels points out, however, such participation has varying degrees.

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Daniels also addresses white supremacist discourse. Through decentralized communication forums such as discussion boards, dialogue has become participatory. This changes the nature of white supremacist discourse because groups that were previously excluded, such as women, have more opportunities for engagement. Another area of discourse that receives much focus is cloaked websites, which serve as instruments of historical revisionism. White supremacist organizations have created seemingly legitimate websites (e.g., www.martinlutherking.org), which challenge common knowledge about racial events. Some of these include slavery, the Holocaust, and the Civil Rights Movement. Daniels thoroughly dissects discourse contained within such websites, but her analysis extends beyond a text-only emphasis. She accounts for how audiences make sense of these sites and their legitimacy using a small case study. Daniels ends her book with a call for change: If racial equity is to be achieved, inaction is not an option. People must collectively seek social justice education, digital literacy, and political action.

Although *Cyber Racism* offers a highly sophisticated, ambitious analysis, it is not without flaw. Some of the problems inherent within Daniels's analysis include theoretical overstatement, methodological inconsistency, and a mismatch between how white supremacy is operationalized and studied. The following critique is not exhaustive, but furthers a discussion of how white supremacy in the cyber age can be better understood. After all, among the first steps toward dismantling white supremacy is to fully understand how it operates.

Despite claims that the analysis has global theoretical applicability, focus throughout *Cyber Racism* remains narrowly limited to activity in Western countries. Much of the book addresses organizations within the United States. Daniels contends that she has picked up Joe Feagin's (2006) concept "the white racial frame" and expanded it to a global context. This is a theoretical overstatement. Because the effect of cyber racism on non-Western countries remains unaddressed, it is unknown how the white racial frame affects countries comprised predominantly of people of color. Daniels's argument cannot be applied globally without more empirical substantiation.

Just as *Cyber Racism* overstates its theoretical applicability, it is also guilty of methodological inconsistency. In chapter three, Daniels includes a case study of an individual act of online white supremacy: Richard Machado and his threatening hate emails. This symbolic case study is thoroughly examined, but it detracts from the overall focus of the book, which is structural issues regarding white supremacist organizations and the web. Inclusion of this chapter is problematic, as even Daniels (2009) acknowledges that “to understand white supremacy more fully, we must move beyond the analysis of individual acts of white supremacy” (37).

The last critique of *Cyber Racism* regards a mismatch between how white supremacy is operationalized and how it is studied. Daniels (2009) defines white supremacy as “a central organizing principle of social life rather than merely an isolated social movement” (10). In contrast to such a broad definition, empirical focus is confined to organizations that subscribe to overt forms of racism (e.g., whites are biologically superior). Subtle forms of white supremacy are consequently overlooked. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001) contends that white supremacy in the post-Civil Rights era is comprised by those who deny white supremacy affiliation and claim to be ideologically blind to race. Omitting “colorblind” white supremacist organizations from focus is problematic because many of these groups apply similarly deceptive tactics. They promote a racially political agenda while distorting ideas in opposition to their own.

Take the American Civil Rights Institute (ACRI, see www.acri.org). It has spearheaded successful legal challenges to affirmative action in several U.S. states. The organization tactically decontextualizes what civil rights are about and reframes affirmative action as inconsistent with abstract notions of individualism. Like the cloaked websites Daniels highlights, ACRI challenges fundamental meanings of racial equality. It does so, however, through the expression of colorblind rhetoric and avoidance of overtly racist sentiments. Because such organizations are no less effective in maintaining white supremacy, they merit analytic inclusion.

Despite shortcomings, *Cyber Racism* is truly a groundbreaking analysis. It adds a vital new element to race and digital studies by addressing a virtually untouched area. Through her rich analysis,

Daniels meets her goal of problematizing digitized white supremacy and discussing what this means for contemporary racial dynamics. The author is not content with ending the analysis there, however, as she offers practical solutions as well. Anyone who advocates racial justice should read this book, as Daniels is an ally in the struggle.