Cover Story

Citizen Journalism,
Structural Discrimination,
and the 'Post-racial' Internet

Introduction

In January 2010 the editors of *Essence,* a U.S. magazine targeting African American women, posted their choice of putting a picture of NFL football player Reggie Bush on the cover of its "Black Love, Men & Relationships" issue to the Internet. The cover was a contentious issue for some readers due to the fact that Reggie Bush's girlfriend at the time was Kim Kardashian, a non-black woman.[1] Upon deep inspection, however, blogger Latoya Peterson of *Racialicious* critically uncovered that the discussion contained significantly more nuance than a simple dichotomy divided along the lines of a like or dislike of interracial coupling (Peterson 2010). Instead, Peterson identified thirteen separate 'genres' of opinion.[2] At the same time, she expressed gratitude that the story had not reached the mainstream, explaining that "what will be taken from this conversation (black women hate interracial dating!) isn't what we are actually reading" (Peterson 2010). Multiple readers added comments agreeing with this position. Not one reader disagreed.

This seems to fly in the face of a general conception among bloggers and those who study them: that the largest success a blog story can receive is that it 'breaks' into the industrial media.[3] Media theorist Axel Bruns proposes a sort of feedback loop between what he terms *citizen journalism* (blogs and other non-professional online news sources) and industrial journalism (the assemblages of industry and capital that developed before the Internet) (Bruns 2008: 93). This *wishing against coverage* provides a vector of potential problematization for Bruns' theory. If the industrial media is perceived as likely to appropriate a diverse dialog and replaces it with its own interpretation based on stereotypes, what is the utility of desiring their modulations[4] anyway?

Also in question is Cass Sunstein's critique of *filtering* found in his book *Republic.com 2.0* in which Sunstein argues that the advent of the "Daily Me" approach to news can lead to extremism and a debilitating disconnect between citizens who may no longer have shared experiences from which to create a sense of community (Sunstein 2007: 5-6). In this model of news, first described and promoted by Nicholas

---

1   Due to the complexity of inter/intra-racial dating in the United States, as evidenced by the case itself, the issue of Kardashian's 'actual' ethnicity will not be addressed directly. For an examination of the issue of her multiracial background and self-conception, see Peterson, 2010.

2   The complete accounting of these viewpoints, in Peterson's words, is included as Appendix A.

3   Also commonly referred to as the Mainstream Media, or MSM.

4   Out of concern for conceptual clarity, Latour's language of 'network' and 'translation' are substituted by *assemblage* and *modulation*.

Negroponte, citizens decide their range of information inputs ahead of time. This results in a decrease, if not a total end, to what Sunstein calls *unplanned encounters*, for example reading an article on a topic you did not expect to read, simply because it is there on the page next to an article that you were planning to read. This element of 'unplanned encounters,' missing in the age of "unlimited filtering," is complicated by race. His exhortations of 'shared experience' can face criticism from an angle of critical race engagement. Sunstein's example of the street as a place of discourse must be put in perspective of relative impossibilities inherent in the differential experience of race. If the most basic example of *civic engagement* results in literally irreconcilable differences in the experience of daily processes, how can one logically argue further exposure to systems plagued by structural discrimination?

The title of this essay refers not only to the assemblage of modulations surrounding *Essence* magazine's editorial decision to print a picture of a man in a biracial relationship on the cover of their "Black Love" issue, but also to a deeper, more vital interpretation. It intends to highlight the industrial media as a distribution point for the rhetoric of the *post-racial* society.[5] Though the term 'post-racial' became widespread in the 2008 industrial media coverage of the Obama campaign, it is possible to trace the political primacy of this particular rhetorical frame some sixteen years prior: to the 1992 campaign and election of Bill Clinton (Nakamura 2008). The core tenet of 'post-racial' is shared by the concept of 'color-blindness,' that is that race need not and should not be taken into account. Chun demonstrates significantly negative aspects of this frame in her account of the 'color-blind' commercialization of the internet and recent research indicates that color-blind attitudes are an indicator of racial insensitivity rather than an indicator of an absence of racism (Chun 2007; Tynes and Markoe 2010). This paper intends to investigate the theoretical work of Axel Bruins and Cass Sunstein in light of these problems (Bruins 2007; Sunstein 2008). Neither of these frameworks deal directly with situations involving racial dynamics and therefore may unwittingly avoid addressing structural discrimination in general (Pincus 2000).

Industrial Journalism: The Rule of Editors and Commerce

In his book *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond*, Axel Bruns puts forth a compelling view of the

5   For an attempt at a properly 'multi-valent' definition utilizing the ANT approach of "letting the actors speak for themselves," see the quote narrative culled from an assemblage of sites resulting from Google searches in March 2010 in Appendix B.

current state of the news media. The industrial media has traditionally served as the "gatekeepers" of the news—from all the news in the world, the editors of the mainstream media determine what news items to report on as well as what perspective the reporting should come from. In the case of capitalist news firms, story selection "is motivated in the first place by commercial and practical considerations" (Bruns 2008: 71). The space on a newspaper page is limited and the time of radio or TV spots are likewise limited. In a commercial enterprise it is deemed necessary to allocate space/time for news spots according to "what is most likely to attract the largest market share for the news product" (Bruns 2008: 71; emphasis added). This focus on 'product' is crucial: the process of commodifying news stories affects those stories in important ways. The first is the drive for a simple conclusion to the story—industrial news practices generally focus on wrapping news with some form of finality, regardless of how appropriate or inappropriate such a finale might be. Even more crucial is the dominance of the company's bottom line: "best intentions are at times negated by the commercial or political imperatives set by the proprietors of commercial news organizations, intentionally introducing a systemic institutional bias" (Bruns 2008: 73).

It is in part the industrial news sector's position as gatekeepers that has driven the incredible expansion of citizen journalism on the Web (Bruns 2008: 70-71). As gatekeepers, industrial news outlets choose, according to their own criterion, what to include in every step of the process. Events that could be considered newsworthy ('inputs') are selected according to criteria that may or may not be unduly mired in commercialism or politics. Of the inputs that are selected, their output is further controlled by an editorial hierarchy. Thus, even if an event is deemed "newsworthy," the way it is presented, which word choices are considered acceptable, and the final composition of the piece (including which pieces may or may not be left out) are further subjected to potential commercial or political interest. The third and final phase is the feedback phase in which once again editorial decisions are made that affect what is chosen from reader responses to be included in the respective 'Letters to the Editor' section of the given publication.

Essence magazine's decisions surrounding the Reggie Jackson cover image demonstrate the three phases described above. The editors presumably first decided to write a story about "Black Love." They then decided to tie Jackson to the idea of "Black Love." This decision was viewed by some commentators as a cynical move to stir up controversy (Peterson 2010). Bruns' description of the industrial news tendency towards commercial considerations is thus a view shared by at least some of those reacting to the cover choice.

Essence's decision at the third phase, however, is perhaps the most important as regards new media

and citizen journalism. According to Peterson's coverage at *Racialicious*, there were over 300 comments at the Essence.com website (Peterson 2010). Clearly Essence.com can facilitate hosting extensive discussions that the pages of *Essence* simply cannot, as industrial media packaging (in this case, a magazine) has space limitations that simply do not apply to online publications. Nevertheless, Essence.com *removed the controversial cover announcement along with its comment thread* (Essence.com 2010). Essence.com's presence in the bibliography only serves to codify that the page title displaying in a browser window when attempting to access the announcement URL reads: "Error —Essence.com."

This editorial act on the part of *Essence* represents an unfortunate attempt to play by rules that do not work on the Web. By removing the comments thread, it becomes impossible to verify the quotes cited on pages such as *BET Entertainment Spotlight* (Noir 2010). It can also be considered an *invasive* act, as it retroactively de-references links throughout the blogosphere. Any blog post which linked back to the original cover announcement no longer has a source of contention to point towards. Only a generic page missing redirect. No matter how poetic it is that Essence.com readily admits to "error" in this case, the impact on the blogosphere's discussion of the controversy is substantial in that the original source of that controversy is no longer verifiable in any real sense. This is not to mention the impact on sociological investigations into the incident. Just as an example, it is difficult to identify the exact date of the announcement. The time frame must instead be guessed at by using the first posts highlighting the existence of extensive debate in the comments thread of the announcement, which appear on 5 January (Essence.com 2010; Castina 2010; DimeWars 2010).

For organizations accustomed to having the final authority on the statements made on their pages, the solution of simply deleting an embarassing web page is not so far-fetched. However, this unfortunate application of industrial media policy on what amounts to a citizen journalism forum (the comment section of the cover announcement) demonstrates the validity of Bruns' claim that journalistic organization's need to respectfully ensure that "the parameters of the online spaces they deploy" fit the standards of citizen journalism at large if they intend to engage with such practices. Considering that editing a blog post after its published is performed with strikeout effects (essentially drawing a line through the center of text that is meant to be changed, such that it is still visible after the correction has been made), deleting a page and discussion that generated so much response can easily be seen as out of order with the principles of citizen journalism.

Citizen Journalism: Watching the Gate

The news 'gate' is a metaphor for a discursive effect born of the infrastructural costs associated with running a news service. The 'gate' is the literal line between a story "breaking" or not. And, as Bruns explains, commercial and political interests often govern where that line ends up being drawn. The advent of the Internet and it's many-to-many publishing capacity, however, has altered the landscape of how news develops. There is a new relationship with the gate, as non-industry connected players can now discuss and critique the very items that the gatekeepers deign to let through their hermetic systems.

> In contrast to gatekeeping, gatewatching does not concern itself with making a comprehensive news selection from all available information in the newsflow; it does not claim to present 'all the news that's fit to print,' thereby also avoiding the somewhat patronizing stance of industrial journalism which overtly or covertly accepts that audiences are too distanced from the newsflow to make intelligent judgments for themselves about what is of interest, importance, and relevance to them. (Bruns 2008: 73)

Unconstrained by the physical, commercial, and political constraints imposed by the industrial news production process, citizen journalism provides a means to exercise *probabilistic* journalism in which it strives for quality through the collectivization of opinion, context, and insight (Bruns 2008: 75). Single posts within the unfolding of a blogosphere discussion are nothing more than the means of furthering that discussion by offering an individual perspective that readers may or may not agree with and may or may not have something imperative to contribute to that perspective. In the vision of ANT, then, these posts are mediators when they inspire modulations between other actors, who then become mediators in the assemblage as their modulations begin affecting that assemblage. Processes of citizen journalism can be conceived as large actor-assemblages in constant states of unfolding, modulating between each other and the external mediators that become focal points of discussion.

This reflects Bruns' focus on describing the undercurrent element of *unfinished artefacts, continuing process* in his view of citizen journalism. While industrial journalism conceives of news as "individual, self-contained news stories that can be printed or broadcast in separate installments," citizen journalism processes focus on the continuous unfolding of dialog about an issue in what amounts to a much more dynamic process (Bruns 2008: 80). The traditional schools of journalism employ an 'inverted pyramid' structure in which each paragraph contains less and less relevant information than its predecessor. Likewise

these schools of journalism see news as distillable into a "standardized product," what could be called a 'single packet' or 'single serving' news story. The net effect is that industrial journalism produces descriptions of events that fail to capture the real complexity of a story.

This is precisely the effect feared by Peterson and sympathetic commentators on the *Racialicious* write-up (Peterson 2010). *Racialicious* itself blogs about "the intersection of race and pop culture" and is dedicated to "no-holds-barred critique of questionable media representations" (Racialicious 2010). The site specifically positions itself in what Bruns calls a gatewatching role. Such a stance has provided Peterson and other contributers (it is a regular host for guest bloggers from throughout the blogosphere) with a great deal of experience in providing citizen journalist reactions to reportage produced within industrial media venues. Readers who commented on Peterson's blog post "Essence Magazine Accidentally Steps Into an Intra/Interracial Dating Minefield" can be said to universally agree with Peterson's observation that the story would be misrepresented by the 'gatekeepers' for the simple fact that no one voiced disagreement (Peterson 2010).

Since participants in the commentary on *Racialicious* blog posts constantly engage with unplanned encounters with text, this case study provides a means of interrogating the role of comments threads in citizen journalism both by the assemblage under scrutiny exists mainly as comments but also because the bulk of Peterson's analysis in her post is based on reporting the different strains of opinions in the discussion regarding the choice of Reggie Bush for the cover.

The Daily Me: Unplanned Encounters, Shared Experiences

Cass Sunstein's *Republic.com 2.0* dwells heavily on the impact of information filtering on a society. 'Echo chambers' in which the like minded speak only to the like minded result in fragmentation and extremism (Sunstein 2008: 6). He identifies two requirements for a "well-functioning system of free expression" (5). The first is that "people should be exposed to materials that they would not have chosen in advance" (5). The second is that "many or most citizens should have a range of common experiences" (6).

Historically these two requisite elements were fulfilled by legal protections surrounding freedom of speech in public spaces such as streets and parks. Under these legal protections anyone could begin to

deliver a speech and no one had the right to stop citizens so long as they obeyed reasonable rules involving the time of day. This means of accessing heterogeneous audiences, however, is constrained by the fact that this means of guaranteeing unplanned encounters is inherently local. The topics discussed need not be, but the audience are statistically likely to be members of the community in which the space exists.

Filling in the gap are *general-interest intermediaries*, Sunstein's formulation of what is elsewhere referred to as industrial or mainstream media. In contrast to a "Daily Me" diet consisting of only what one expects and desires to see, those who receive their information largely from general-interest intermediaries "have a range of chance encounters, involving shared experience with diverse others, and also exposure to materials and topics that they did not seek out in advance" (Sunstein 2008: 8-9). General-interest intermediaries thus provide solutions for both the problem of the *unplanned encounter* and *shared experience*. Yet Peterson's hope that "the mainstream continues to miss this story" belies a crucial problem with general-interest intermediaries, one that Sunstein hints at when he clarifies his position on these intermediaries:

> None of these claims depends on a judgment that general-interest intermediaries always do an excellent—or even a good—job. Sometimes such intermediaries fail to provide even a minimal understanding of topics or opinions. Sometimes they offer a watered-down version of what most people already think. Sometimes they suffer from prejudices and biases of their own. Sometimes they deal little with substance and veer toward sound bits and sensationalism, properly deplored trends in the last decades. (Sunstein 2008: 31)

One should not, he argues, consider this to be held to the detriment of advocating and praising general-interest intermediaries which, "in their best forms ... expose people to a range of topics and views at the same time that they provide shared experiences for a heterogeneous public" (31). Why, then, would the readers and editor of *Racialicious* display such trepidation at the idea of the cover controversy going mainstream through one of these very mediaries?

Color-blindness: Blame redirection

The ideology of color-blindness stems from the formation of the concept of Asian Americans as a "model minority" after World War II (Nakamura 2008: 3). Prior to this development race was considered a

biological barrier to "assimilation" into the white culture that defined itself as *the* American culture.[6] A new "ethnic" formulation of race was pushed by a liberal ideology that defined identity along cultural lines. By positioning Asian Americans, with their "low usage of welfare and political docility" and success in education, as "prime examples of racialized subjects who had overcome the barrier of color, or race-as-biology, to become model consumers of commodities as well as creators of economic value," the liberal ideology instituted a vision of society that refused to examine historical categorizations of race even as it pushed for a society in which color was of *to be held as* no consequence (4).

This cynical avoidance of the "wedge issue of race" was embraced wholeheartedly by the Clinton-Gore presidential campaign of 1992. Breaking with close to fifty years of tradition in Democratic candidate promises to address racial inequality, Clinton avoided "all discussion of race in favor of concerns that were perceived as more 'universalist,' such as funding to support causes dear to suburban dwellers" (Nakamura 2008: 2). In the words of critical race theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Clinton's campaign represented a "limited but real adoption of Republican racial politics" (quoted in Nakamura 2008: 3).

This historical shift occurred at the cusp of the rise of Internet and its ideology would become deeply embedded in the commercialization of cyberspace. In Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's view, it is significant to note that "[r]ace was, and still is, central to conceiving cyberspace as a utopian commercial sphere. More precisely, *conceiving race as skin-deep* has been crucial in conceiving technology as screen deep" (Chun 2006: 129; emphasis added). Chun uses the advertising campaigns of MCI, Cisco, and Etrade.com to illustrate the ways in which corporations began spinning real drawbacks of Internet communications ("potential deception and unverifiability") into a means of overcoming the discrimination that is a part of the daily physical lives of racial minorities—"what *they* can't see, can't hurt *you*" (132).

> Since race, gender, age, and infirmities are only skin-deep (or so this logic goes), moving to a text-based medium makes them—and thus the discrimination that *stems from them*—disappear. Although "no race" rather than "no racism" leaves open the possibility of racism without physical markers of "race," this formulation effectively conceals individual and institutional responsibility for discrimination, positing discrimination as a problem that the discriminated must solve. The message is not even "do not discriminate." It is "get online if you want to be avoid being discriminated against." For those always already marked, the Internet supposedly relieves them of *their problem,* of *their flesh* that races, genders, ages, and handicaps them, of *their body* from which they usually cannot escape. Ineffaceable difference,

---

6 Despite having longstanding relationships, dependencies, and appropriations from other races living in the same space and time as themselves, at virtually every step of the way. For easy precedence, see the story of Thanksgiving.

> rather than discrimination, engenders oppression, which the discriminated, rather than the
> discriminators, must alleviate." (132-133)

This same re-direction of "blame" highlighted by Chun, enabled both by color-blind ideology itself and its application in the selling of the Internet persists in the positioning of America as a post-racial society.

This blame redirection is highlighted by race and literary scholar Dwight A. McBride in the introduction to his book *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch* while describing his reaction to a contextually convivial conversation with a colleague,

> That is, if the people who are the most obvious victims of particular forms of discrimination (in this case racism) are also the most readily disqualified as witnesses to those same forms of discrimination, then according to such logic only those people who are not victimized by racism (i.e., whites) are the ones who are, indeed, the best and most reliable witnesses and judges to what actually happens to those racial "others" in our society. So what we have effectively done is to rhetorically de-authorize or de-legitimize the victims of discrimination in our society from ever being able to speak authoritatively about their own experiences of discrimination. We have rhetorically seized their ability to bear authoritative witness to, or even to be in the best position to know, what it is that happens to them in the world. (McBride 2005: 4)

This same phenomenon is continuously carried out online.[7]

It is imperative to note that the ideal of "shared experience" as idealized by Sunstein is an impossibility when it comes to matters of race. Even the act of articulating something as racially offensive is shoved back in the offended's face with the full force of color-blind, post-race ideology behind it *by the offenders themselves,* not neglecting to mention the literal impossibility of sharing the experience of oppression from the same perspective. Every experience of race is differential, unique. How does Sunstein's metaphor of the street as an ideal forum for "unplanned encounters" in relation to the fact that the street is the location of the second highest rate of racial hate crimes? (Sunstein 2008: 9; Federal Bereau of Investigation 2008)

The idealization of the street as a potential public square belies the gap in shared experience between Sunstein, and all whites, and those who live on streets as people of color. Our lived lives unfold in completely different ways. An example can be taken from Cornel West's preface to *Race Matters* in which he describes attempting to hail a cab in Manhattan on his way to the appointment to shoot the cover of his book. He is passed by eight empty taxis, one of which stops to pick up a white woman standing nearby before he decides that his best option lies in walking to a subway (West 1994).

---

7   Appendix B

Structural Discrimination: Un-wanted Encounters, Un-shareable Experiences

Color-blind/post-racial ideology fits the definition of *structural discrimination* provided by sociologist Fred L. Pincus in his essay "Discrimination Comes in Many Forms: Individual, Institutional, and Structural":

> *structural discrimination* refers to the policies of dominant race/ethnic/gender institutions and the behavior of the individuals who implement these policies and control these institutions, which are race/ethnic/gender neutral in intent but which have a differential and/or harmful effect on minority race/ethnic/gender groups (Pincus 2000: 1)

The premise of the color-blind/post-racial ideology is that race is neutral in the sense that it is irrelevant.

Complicating this is fresh research from University of Illinois researchers Brendesha M. Tynes and Suzanne L. Markoe. Using a simulated social networking site to gauge participating African American and European American college students' responses to racially inflammatory images, their findings indicate that individual's both those who assert that they have a "color-blind attitude" and European Americans are statistically more likely indicate that they were 'not bothered' by the inflammatory imagery (Tynes and Markoe 2010). This imagery consisted of racially insensitive party pictures culled from Facebook. For example, students were shown pictures taken at a "gangsta" party celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday featuring white people in black face. This corroborates the existence of a wide disconnect between the shared experiences of African Americans and European Americans.

Color-blindness even affects the capacity of scientists to perform properly scientific experiments. Recent research was claimed to suggest that "the roots of racial prejudice lie deep within the brain" (Macrae 2010) and grand claims were made about the nature of 'people.' Researchers scanned the brains of white men observing both members of their own and other races picking up a glass of water and drinking it. The brain's empathic area lit up most when observing members of the white race.

Dr. Inzlicht, the head researcher, casually assumes that the observations "would still have been similar" if performed with any other group (Macrae 2010). Whether this assertion is true or not is certainly testable through science, thus it did not escape the notice of many who read the article that when the scientists wrote conclusions about 'people' in their research, they are referring to *white people* (Resistance!

2010).[8] Commentary in reaction to this research expressed *historically corroborative* evidence of this phenomenon and claims were made that other races would have more empathic reaction to other races (Resistance! 2010). The feedback provided by brain scans appears as a contentious mediator in the dialog of race.

Color-blind ideology not only persists, it has been bolstered by the emergence of the term post-racial and the supposed advent of a post-racial society following the election of Barack Obama (Pitts 2009). Viewed through the definition provided by Pincus, and in light of the effects of color-blindness in the above examples, it has been demonstrated that the color-blind/post-racial ideology is a form of structural discrimination: it both poses as a race neutral ideology and has detrimental effects on the racialized subjects it disabuses of the right to voice complaint about endemic experiences. It's prevalence in both the industrial media and the online world situates it as perhaps the most pervasive form of structural discrimination in the United States today.

Contesting Sunstein

Do the difficulties facing shared experiences and unplanned encounters in light of the divide between the lived lives of individuals from different races discredit the central thesis of *Republic.com 2.0?* It is clear that Sunstein understands that "small or disadvantaged groups" have easier access to their "preferred fare" (Sunstein 2008: 14). An example from the *Racialicious* post about the Reggie Bush cover provides a means to test the relevance of his assertions about unplanned encounters and shared experience.

Comment 97 in the thread, provided by *Anna*, questions why the love between her and her black fiance would not be considered "black love" (Peterson 2010). "I am a white woman, my fiance is black, I consider him to be a black man thus his love is black —he has been raised by a black family, community, and so forth. Why would his love not be black?" (Peterson 2010).

Comment 98, provided by *Michelle*, begins by stating that the author forced herself to re-read the *Racialicious* comment moderation policy before replying because she "was incredibly fired up by Anna's

---

8   The history of this linguistic "turn" is longstanding. For easy precedence, see the United States' Constitution and the interpretations of "We the people" leading up until the Civil Rights movement.

post" (Peterson 2010). At stake is Michelle's sense of having the "place of one's own" that *Essence*, at least in theory, represents for black women. This place represents a buffer from an outside world that does not appear to share nor respect the shared experiences of that demographic. As Anna questions why "black love" must refer to love between two black people, Michelle responds

> let me be honest, a White woman speculating that her love with a Black man is 'Black love' is particularly confronting. Black love is a term that has long been in usage in the Black community and has never really been talked about outside our community until now, on this actual thread. I don't think that many people get how important the term is for many segments of the Black community and while not a sacred term, it is still a term that I feel should be defined by the very people who hold the concept of Black love so near and dear to their hearts. (Peterson 2010).

This discourse highlights the role of unplanned encounters in an intriguing way. On the one hand Michelle is so upset that she finds herself wording her response very carefully for fear that her comment might not meet moderator approval and thus would not appear in the discussion at all. On the other hand that very unplanned encounter with Anna's words results in one of the most elucidating comments on the page, if not in the entire case study. White readers encountering Michelle's personal, yet *communally shared* idea of "Black love" thus inherit a shared experience of deeper understanding on the issue. Michelle's disquieted yet thought-provoking post stands as a testament to Sunstein's proposition that unplanned encounters are a powerful means of transforming minds and world views.

Contesting Bruns

The central problem facing Bruns' theory in light of this case study is his call for an increased degree of feedback between industrial and citizen journalism sources (Bruns 2008: 90). This problem, however, is not as much with his call for an "arrest to [industrial media's] slide towards punditry" as it is with the structural discrimination employed by the industrial media in its coverage of vulnerable communities (90). A large part of this problem, in general, is the post-racial ideology. However, in the *Essence* cover case itself the fear runs deeper—it is a stereotype (that black women dislike interracial relationships) and a history of one-sided coverage that inspires the fear of industrial media coverage (Peterson 2010). Bruns' call for a reinvigorated industrial media that produces "clear, balanced, and factual investigative reporting which

drills deeply into issues but avoids a focus on the interpretation of the facts it uncovers" is then only strengthened by the case study (Bruns 2008: 90).

In fact, Latoya Peterson's post on *Racialicious* may indicate a productive route forward for achieving this goal in fusing a workable bridge between industrial and citizen media. By taking a seemingly monolithic, binary discussion (for or against interracial relationships) and delving into the comments sections themselves, Peterson is able to unpack a discussion spanning hundreds and hundreds of comments across the "4 or 5" blogs that she investigated, emerging with a generic description of the multi-valent perspectives presented in that discussion. This represents an important, yet missing, journalistic practice: the analyses of online comments themselves.

Discussion threads are the vanguard of citizen journalism, the cutting edge where actors who are not "publishers" themselves nevertheless publish opinion and information that spans the entire range of relevance. Peterson's work in following the traces of actors in order to finalize a summary of the diverse opinions reflects precisely ANT's perspective towards determining groups through their own articulations (Latour 2005: 29). Whether her post was written in direct awareness of ANT theory or not, the utility of Latour's approach in the digestion of online discussions is validated by Peterson's work.

Conclusion

The outstanding issues concerning the applicability of either Sunstein's or Bruns' theories to the case study revolve around the industrial media/general-interest intermediaries. As both authors present the actors as problematic in everything but their 'ideal' formulations, the theories cannot be held accountable for this systemic shortcoming in their subject. Rather than indicating serious problems with either theory, which could be the impression delivered from a first glance, the case instead seems to impress the necessity of an *increased sensitivity* to the proposals those theories contain.

For Sunstein, the issue of unplanned encounters is magnified in two ways: one is the inability of the general-interest intermediaries to perform a responsible duty in reporting the case, thus leaving out the possibility of "outsiders" encountering the case, *responsibly reported*, by accident. The second is the degree to which unplanned encounters informed the case itself. The *Essence* readership was caught by surprise with

the cover in the first place. The *Essence* editor who made the final approval of the cover was likewise caught by surprise that there would be any controversy at all (Louis 2010). In the meantime. By mid-January, the cover announcement on Essence.com was reporting "Error," possibly corroborating Louis' assertion of surprise. Finally, Michelle's unplanned encounter with Anna's words inspired her to share a perspective from inside a vulnerable community with all the Internet users that exist outside of that community (Peterson 2010). Her comment will be read by the uninitiated and incorporated as a shared experience among them. All of these incidents point to an underlying validity within Sunstein's theory.

For Bruns, the tension between the black female community as expressed by Peterson (coupled, always, with the comments on her post) and the industrial media is a problem not of his theory but of widespread structural discrimination. The hypothetical portrayal of this case in the industrial media, universally expected as a reinforcement of the stereotype that "black women don't like interracial relationships," would indeed represent structural discrimination as those in power (the industrial editors) would deliver a purportedly neutral account (the objective news report) to the detriment of the vulnerable population discussed (the flattening of an extremely varied discussion into a monolithic stereotype). The answer, then, does lie in continuing to instigate feedback *along new lines of understanding* between the industrial and citizen media in matters that regard race. There are many issues that advocates such as Black Entertainment Television founder Sheila Johnson are attempting to draw attention towards (Plaid 2010). There is a great deal of room for important industrial journalism, so long as it were approached with the care and concern Bruns advocates (90).

After taking into account the clear problems faced by vulnerable populations in relation to their coverage in the industrial media/general-interest intermediaries, the respective theories come out even stronger in their appeal to generating fundamental shifts in the media landscape. Structural discrimination is the primary block on accurate mainstream reporting of issues concerning vulnerable population. In attempting to articulate avenues for redressing existing issues with the current media landscape, both theories offer potential vectors of action to highlight and articulate the damage caused by the structural discrimination endemic to the industrial media.

Appendix A: Peterson's Account of the Viewpoints Expressed

- Some are using the controversy to reinforce stereotypes about black people, in general. ("While I did have a best friend thats black we mostly hung out with 2520s. [Note: 2520s means "whitey"]. And you know what?…We had FUN! There wasnt someone always clocking what you wore, who you were dating, or what car you drove…")

- Some use it to reinforce stereotypes about overly picky black women ("Every guy on here, myself included, knows at least one single, eligible brother that is looking for love, from a black woman. But he'll get zero play …")

- Some use it to reinforce stereotypes about evil black women ("The truth is black women are spoiled beyond belief.")

- Some say it's not about the relationships, but standards of beauty that shortchange black women ("I don't think anyone really cares about the race of Joe NBA Blow's wife, but rather "is anyone attracted to me? will I ever fit into the conventional & more popular standard of beauty? and will this definition ever be broad enough to include my image?"")

- Some discussed flawed expectations of racial solidarity ("Black women have NO obligation to support Reggie Bush b/c he is a "brother". You know, the same way he's not obligated to date a black woman b/c she is a sista.")

- Others mention it's about the elevated hoops black women have to jump through to be considered on-par with her white counterparts ("I've known men who had impossible standards for the Black women they dated, only to settle for the most marginal of women when they were of another race.")

- Some brought up that it wasn't Kardashian's race, but her exploits that caused the controversy ("for the black men that are dating white strippers and hoes, if they are willing to go that route,

do you think you would really want to be with them anyway.")

- Some say the fact that Kardashian isn't racially identified is a bonus ("Kim Kardashian may not be black,and shes not white either. At least he didnt go get a waifer thin white girl like many of them do. Shes beautiful and thick!")

- Quite a few people said they expected this of *Essence* ("WHAT are you mad about? Requiring Essence to be anything more than superficial or topical would be like standing over a glass bowl expecting a gold fish to articulate the Theory of Relativity.")

- Some think it's just celebrity drama ("Reggie Bush is a mediocre football player and Kim's famous for no viable reason. They seem like each other's equals to me.")

- Some want to give Bush the benefit of the doubt ("how many people have ever heard Reggie Bush speak about how he feels about black women? Or examined his dating past? Just wondering. Maybe he wanted to try something new.")

- Some say the cover is just eye candy ("He was chosen for the cover for his sex appeal, not his cultural relevance to Black women")

- Many are indifferent ("In conclusion, was Reggie Bush the best choice for the Essence cover? No, probably not. But should we freak out or get mad about it? No. Why get your blood pressure up?")

(Peterson 2010)

Appendix B: An ANT Demonstration of 'Post-racial'

"A true definition is undoubtedly hard to come by, as the term and connotations of the term are dubious. The idea of a post-racial society, in its most basic form, is a society in which race is no longer significant or important."

"Is America Really Post-racial?," *suite101.com* (Miles 2008)

[This site is returned as the first result in a Google query 'definition post-racial',

(30 March 2010)]

"No longer bound by racial divisions."

wiktionary (Wiktionary 2010)

"To exist beyond the point where race is a consideration."

urbandictionary (Urban Dictionary 2010)

"I'm not sure I want to be "post-racial" because that would mean denial of one's ethnic, racial and cultural heritage, and I'm not down with that, especially if that's what it means to be "post-racial" in America."

"What is "Post-Racial" and Where Is It?," *Jack and Jill Politics* (CPL 2009)

"The post-racial America of which Obama's champions speak does not mean the end of racial preferences for nonwhites. It does not mean the end of constant accusations of white racism. It does not mean the end of the systematic cover-up of blacks' lower abilities, and of the fact that these lower abilities, not white racism, are the reason blacks are behind. It does not mean the end of the systematic cover up of the true facts of black-on-white crime. It does not mean the end of mandatory sensitivity training for whites. It does not mean the end of the belief that there is a moral cloud over America's entire history up until the civil rights movement--or, in the event Obama is elected, up until the election of Barack Obama. … Post-racial America is an America in which whites, as whites, go silent forever."

"What is post-racial America?," *View from the Right* (Auster 2008)

"It's a feel good term for white folks so they can stop saying "I'm not racist, I have black friends" Don't get me wrong, I understand that a lot of white folks feel guilty and they don't know why when they've never called a black person a n*gger (i'm a very tongue-in-cheek person, so this may go over people's heads) so they need this post-racial stuff, but the ONLY thing we need to be focused on is being honest and calling our society post-racial is not being honest and only continuing what has been wrong all this time."

<div align="right">Commenter ASmith (CPL 2009)</div>

"The following statement may shock some people who have long strived for a colorblind society as a solution to the racism that has plagued us: a colorblind society is detrimental, no matter how well-intentioned, to the cause of creating a post-racial society. … Colorblindness is, by definition, a position of ignorance. It chooses to ignore and deny the reality around us, opting for a collective mental enema that makes social thought-criminals out of anyone intrepid enough to acknowledge or discuss race. It looks upon the rainbow that is our country and see a dull, gray arc. A post-racial society cannot be one bred in defiance of the truth but one bred in reason and intellectualism - one that can intelligently use the lessons of the past and thusly strive toward a better, more cohesive future."

<div align="right">"We Are Not Yet a Post-racial Society," The Watchman (Watchman 2009)</div>

"... I would say that we have been in "post-racial America" for over 30 years. To approximately 99 percent of whites, it is forbidden for them to think as whites and to act from the white perspective. ... I believe once affluence begins to fade in this post-racial world and crime, disease, poverty begin to consume whole states, we will see whites acting more like men, and less as mice."

<div align="right">Commenter Mark Jaws (Auster 2008)</div>

"Ironically, the media, which is the institution claiming post-racialism, is the very institution promoting a racial divide. When analyzing the votes, the press looks at the racial demographic break down of the votes and highlights it on the front page of major newspapers. If we are to truly think we're beyond the focus of race, it shouldn't be the main focus."

<div align="right">"Is America Really Post-racial?," suite101.com (Miles 2008)</div>

""Post racial" is a cowardly term that folks, mostly white folks, are trying to use to excuse the uncomfortable feeling they get when issues of race arise. That feeling usually manifests itself in the phrase "Can't we just get past all that and not talk about it anymore?" That is how I interpret the term 'post-racial'"

Commenter *isonprize* (CPL 2009)

"90% of white people are post racism. 75% of blacks are reverse racist. which does more to keep racism alive than anything. black communities continue to be the most violent places on earth. fear breeds fear."

Commenter *Guest* [first comment in thread, from the first hit on Google] (Miles 2008)

Bibliography

Auster, Lawrence. "What is post-racial America?" *View from the Right* (blog). *[Date not documented on page. It's position between two other postings about then on-going 2008 Presidential Elections point to a pre-November 2008 date]*. 2008. Web. (http://www.amnation.com/vfr/archives/010000.html)

Bruns, Axel. *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*. Print. New York: Peter Lang. 2008.

Castina. "Reggie Bush Essence Cover Controversy." PopCrunch, *HipHopCrunch.* 5 January 2010. Web. (http://hiphop.popcrunch.com/reggie-bush-essence-cover-controversy/) (Last accessed 30 March 2010)

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. *Control and Freedom: Power and paranoia in the age of fiber optics.* Cambridge: MIT Press. 2006. Print.

CPL (The Christian Progressive Liberal). "What is "Post-Racial" and Where Is It?" *Jack and Jill Politics.* 3 March 2009. Web. (http://www.jackandjillpolitics.com/2009/03/what-is-post-racial-and-where-is-it/)

DimeWars. "Reggie Bush Gets The Cover Of Essence Magazine - How Do The Sistas Feel About This?" *DimeWars.* 5 January 2010. Web. (http://dimewars.com/Blog/Reggie-Bush-Gets-The-Cover-Of-Essence-Magazine---How-Do-The-Sistas-Feel-About-This-.aspx) (Last accessed 30 March 2010)

Essence.com. "Error —Essence.com." *Essence.com.*(Last accessed 30 March 2010) (http://www.essence.com/magazine/reggie_bush_on_the_february_cover_of_ess.php)

Federal Bureau of Investigation. "2007 hate crime statistics: Incidents bias motivation by location." 2008. (http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/hc2007/table_10.htm). (Last accessed 4 May 2010).

Holmes, Jamie. "'Postracial' America, One Year Later." *Huffington Post*. 5 November 2009. Web. (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jamie-holmes/postracial-america-one-ye_b_346967.html) (Last accessed 30 March 2010)

Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.

Louis, Demetria. "Reflections: Reggie Bush." *A Belle in Brooklyn* (blog). 7 January 2010. Web. (http://www.abelleinbrooklyn.com/home/2010/1/7/reflections-reggie-bush.html) (Last accessed 30 March 2010)

Macrae, Fiona. "The roots of racism are in our brains, based on empathy." *Mail Online*. 28 April 2010. Web. (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1269561/Our-brains-make-empathise-people-race.html)

McBride, Dwight A. *Why I hate Abercrombie & Fitch: essays on race and sexuality.* New York: New York University Press. 2005. Print.

Nakamura, Lisa. *Digitizing Race: Visual cultures of the Internet.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2008. Print.

Noir, Dior. "Essence Takes Heat For Reggie Bush Cover." *BET Entertainment Spotlight.* 7 January 2010. Web. (http://blogs.bet.com/entertainment/spotlight/2010/01/07/essence-takes-heat-for-reggie-bush-cover/) (Last accessed 30 March 2010)

Peterson, Latoya. "Essence Magazine Accidentally Steps Into an Intra/Interracial Dating Minefield." *Racialicous* (blog). 15 January 2010. Web (http://www.racialicious.com/2010/01/12/essence-magazine-accidentally-steps-into-an-intrainterracial-dating-minefield/) (Last accessed 30 March 2010)

Pincus, Frank L. "Discrimination Comes in Many Forms: Individual, Institutional, and Structural." Extracted with permission from Readings for Diversity and Social Justice. Edited by Maurianne Adams, etc., Published 2000.

Pitts, Leonard, Jr. "Commentary: 'Post-racial' America isn't here yet." *CNN Politics* (web). 28 March 2009. (http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/03/28/pitts.black.america/index.html) (Last accessed 30 March 2010)

Racialicious. "Racialicious —the intersection of race and pop culture." *Racialicious* (blog). (http://racialicious.com) (Last accessed 31 March 2010)

Resistance!. "See? Told ya!" *Resist Racsm* (blog). 3 May 2010. Web. (http://resistracism.wordpress.com/2010/05/03/see-told-ya/). (Last accessed 4 May 2010).

Sunstein, Cass. *Repulic.com 2.0*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2007. Print.

Toldja, Sister. "Deep Cover." *The Beautiful Struggler* (blog). 6 January 2010. Web. (http://thebeautifulstruggler.com/2010/01/deep-cover.html) (Last accessed 30 March 2010)

Tolerance.org. "White Anti-Racism: Living the Legacy." *Teaching Tolerance* (website). No date specified, no context to discover it. (http://www.tolerance.org/activity/white-anti-racism-living-legacy) (Last accessed 31 March 2010)

Tynes, Brendesha M. and Suzanne L. Markoe. "The Role of Color-blind Attitudes in Reactions to Racial Discrimination on Social Network Sites." Journal of Diversity in Higher Education. 2010. Vol. 3, No. 1, 1–13

Watchman, The. "We are not yet a post-racial society." *The Watchman* (blog). 19 January 2009. (http://thepoliticalwatchman.blogspot.com/2009/01/we-are-not-yet-post-racial-society.html) (Last accessed 30 March 2010)

West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. New York: Vintage Press, 1994.

Williams, Lauren. "Reggie Bush Covers Essence: Kim Kardashian Controversy." BV on Love, *Black Voices* (AOL blog). 6 January 2010. Web. (http://www.bvonlove.com/2010/01/06/reggie-bush-essence-cover-february/) (Last accessed 30 March 2010)

Yolanda6. "Reggie Bush: Essence Cover Boy." *brown sista*. 5 January 2010. Web. (http://brownsista.com/reggie-bush-essence-cover-boy/) (Last accessed 30 March 2010)