

Transgressive Networks: *This Week in Blackness* and Resistance through Online Programming

Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of power and resistance surrounding the independent online media network *This Week in Blackness* (*TWiB*). Created by Elon James White, *TWiB* is comprised of six podcasts covering a diverse range of topics, an active blog, and a fully functioning social networking site. White and his co-hosts L. Joy Williams, Dacia Mitchell, and Aaron Rand Freeman, collectively nicknamed Team Blackness, have gained visibility in the progressive media world and have cultivated a substantial online audience. Despite this, *TWiB* has had difficulty connecting with other media outlets or finding sponsors to support their work. I argue that this is because *TWiB*'s programming embraces a diverse, heterogeneous, and internally contradictory understanding of "Blackness" that makes it largely incompatible with existing media production and consumption paradigms even in online and independent media spaces.

Keywords

race and ethnicity; podcasts; independent media

This paper explores the dynamics of power and resistance that surround the programming of the independent online media network *This Week in Blackness* (*TWiB*). The terms "programming" and "network" function in a dual sense here. While *TWiB* can be thought of as a traditional independent media network producing programming in the form of six audio podcasts, *TWiB* also exists online as a network of individuals and technologies. Manuel Castells (2011) argues that within this latter definition of networks a key locus of power is "programming," or setting of the ideological, discursive, and normative parameters, of the network. *TWiB*'s programming, in both understandings of the word, deliberately cultivates resistance. By explicitly invoking "Blackness," it rejects the discourses of colorblindness that are the prevailing racial framework in the U.S. Yet, simultaneously, it actively resists alignment with common political and cultural frames frequently relied upon by both mainstream and independent media to make Blackness culturally intelligible. *TWiB* intentionally destabilizes racial paradigms, particularly through the network's persistent attention to the dynamics of intersectionality. As a result of its transgressive programming, designed in ways that are largely incompatible with the logics of existing media networks, *TWiB* has found difficulty gaining support from advertisers and other media outlets.

Comedian, political commentator, and digital media entrepreneur Elon James White was once told by a colleague, "There will never be an intelligent nigger show." While White rejected this statement, he found himself at a loss for examples that could disprove such an assertion. In 2008, White launched a successful video series titled *This Week in Blackness*, and by the beginning of 2013 had developed *TWiB* into an online media franchise comprised of six podcasts covering a diverse array topics, an extensive blog, and a fully functioning social networking site. *TWiB* has been a labor of love for White and his co-hosts L. Joy Williams, Dacia Mitchell, and Aaron Rand Freeman, know collectively as "Team Blackness." Independently funded and operated out of White's home in Brooklyn, *TWiB* has managed on site coverage from events across the country such as the NAACP's Leadership 500 Conference and the Black Congressional Caucus Conference. Their flagship show, *TWiB* Radio, dubbed Best Podcast by the 2011 Black Weblog Awards, has attracted a range of high profile guests including Jesse Jackson, Melissa Harris-Perry, Ben Jealous, Lizz Winstead, Tim Wise, and Michael Eric Dyson. Though *TWiB* has achieved visibility in the progressive media world and boasts a substantial and engaged fanbase, with over 120,000 downloads of its shows in the first the week of February 2013, it has struggled to find both media partners and advertiser support.

Despite their popularity and impressive output, *TWiB* has found difficulty connecting to other media networks. This is largely because *TWiB* offers neither a clear audience demographic for advertisers nor clear affinities with other Black media brands. Media professionals and prospective sponsors have repeatedly told Team Blackness that there simply is no audience for their content, and Black media franchises like *News One* and *The Root* have eschewed proposed partnerships with *TWiB*. *TWiB*'s audience is comprised of predominantly single, middle-class, college educated 24-44 year olds who are disproportionately female and 40 percent non-Black (White, 2013). These fans embrace *TWiB*'s eclectic content that ranges from in depth political analysis to video game reviews to off-color conversation about the oddest and most inappropriate news of the day. Neither *TWiB*'s audience nor its shows fit with pre-existing models of media audiences or representations. *TWiB* is programmed, both in Castell's sense and in terms of media content, to resist easy categorization, making it a risky proposition for advertisers and media outlets alike.

Perhaps the most transgressive aspect of how the *TWiB* network is programmed is its emphasis on intersectionality. At the core of *TWiB*'s project is the destabilization of constructions of Blackness through the embrace of intragroup diversity. Generally, media spaces marked as "Black" privilege racial identities and discourses over those of gender, sexuality, or class. This often, as Kimberle Crenshaw (1991, pp. 1282) argues, serves to reify rather than challenge social hierarchies and power relations. *TWiB* invokes Black racial identity as inseparable from gender identity, sexuality, and class, colliding these discourses in ways that disintegrate the forms of identity politics that are often perceived as the only alternative to mainstream U.S. culture's quest for "colorblindness." In the context of *TWiB*'s programming, Blackness becomes not one, or even a handful of perspectives and experiences, but a complex polyphony of Black voices that is unruly and not easily intelligible in existing media paradigms.

Combining analysis of over 500 hours of audio produced by *TWiB* with ethnographic data obtained through interviews with Team Blackness and in-studio observations of their production practices, I explore how *TWiB* resists prevailing media practices and racial representations through attention to intersectionality. This paper contributes to two underdeveloped bodies of academic literature – race and digital media and podcasting. Digital media studies often erases users of color and the dynamics of race and racial identity online. When users of color do receive scholarly attention, most often they are cast as victims with limited technological access and resources (Nelson et al., 2001, pp. 1-3). This frames people of color as technological outsiders and obscures the many people of color who are online (Everett, 2008). Further, there has been little research about podcasting in general, and Black podcasters are completely absent from this literature. However, there is a large and vibrant community of Black podcasters with well over forty different podcasts interconnected by a network of hosts and fans, the majority of whom explicitly mark themselves and their work as Black. This paper contributes to the much-needed examination of the intersection of race and podcasting as a form of independent media production.

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