

Intersectionality and Critical Engagement With The Internet

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McMillan Cottom, Tressie. 2015. "Intersectionality and Critical Engagement With The Internet" in *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class, and Culture Online* eds. Safiya U. Noble and Bredesha Tynes. Peter Lang Publishing.

It is hard to use the Internet and not encounter its intersections. In many ways our most favored Internet tools and platforms call on intersectionality to beckon and entrance us. Psychologists have argued that Facebook is so popular because it satisfies our need for connectedness and brings our "offline"¹ relationships into communication with each other in ways that would violate social norms if we tried it in real life. In what world, except the digital, would you invite your high school cheerleading squad to pull up a chair next to your business clients and your third cousin removed on your father's side? It is as if we are resisting the borders that define our various selves each time we log in, update, retweet, fave, vine, and share. In the language of intersectionality, millions of people use social media to navigate the inadequacy of a single analytical frame for our social lives (McCall 2005). In short, we are messy and complicated and we seem to want our digital tools to reflect that. But, intersectionality was never just an analytical tool to describe the lives lived across borders. Intersectionality was to be an account of power as much as it was an account of identities (Crenshaw 1991). As I looked

¹ I acknowledge the lively debate about "digital dualism", particularly among cultural studies scholars. For analytical clarity I will occasionally use "online" and "offline" in the structural sense. In primarily refers to the centrality of space (online) as opposed to place (offline) in the dominant mode of interaction.

² "allied health care" refers to the paraprofessional medical field occupations, e.g. phlebotomists, medical records clerks, and nursing assistants.

³ For-profit colleges are so named because their Internal Revenue Service designation

across our research silos – disciplines and prestige hierarchies and cultures and nation-states – for examples of intersectionality on and in Internet studies I kept this idea of power in mind. I did this for several reasons. As a sociologist, it is a professional imperative that I think about power. Also, I am a heterosexual black woman in the U.S. during a time when each and all of those identities mean something specific for my mobility, safety, visibility and politics. And, as a person who has been these various intersecting identities while in and on the Internet I have experienced various formations of power in platforms, collectivities, cultures, and structures. Drawing on my research of online and for-profit education, I put forth an example of how intersectionality elucidates current debates in Internet studies and points towards a framework for future research.

First, one has to be clear about what intersectionality framework one is adopting. A full treatment of the various debates in and about intersectionality falls beyond the scope of this paper (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Davis 2008; Lewis 2009; McCall 2005). In brief, intersectionality is one of those rare social theories to combine precision of theory with broadness of method (Lykke 2011). That combination has served intersectionality's diffusion through social sciences and humanities quite well. It has also created tensions about what intersectionality really means and how best to measure it (or, if it should be measured at all!). I most often study institutions like education and work (Cottom 2014; McMillan-Cottom 2014; Neem et al. 2012). And, I understand one dimension of power as the mobilization of capital and politics to the benefit of some at the expense of others. Within that superstructure, any site of cultural production is located in an existing

hierarchy of groups and resources, with power flowing betwixt the two like the Thames. In the black feminist tradition, I believe that examining the points of various structural processes where they most numerously manifest is a way to isolate the form and function of those processes in ways that can be obscured when we study them up the privilege hierarchy (Hill Collins 2000). Essentially, no one knows best the motion of the ocean than the fish that must fight the current to swim upstream. I study fish that swim upstream. Given all of these attestations to my social location vis-à-vis my intellectual production, I will call on a methodological practice of “contextual and comparative methodology” grounded in the theoretical imperative to center marginalized groups by examining intersectionality in a “process-centered, institutionally complex way” (Choo and Ferree 2010:131). For the purposes of this critical interrogation of intersectionality and the Internet, that means I will focus on institutions as nadirs of power, the processes by which various intersecting oppressions are enacted, and the means by which groups resist and experience these inter/intra-actions.

I shall begin this inquiry for an intersectionality of institutions and power in Internet studies close to my home turf. Once, I worked somewhere that is not academia. It is strange, I know, but trust me that it happens. In this early pre-academia life, I worked for a social service agency that aimed to move people from “welfare to work”. You may recall this period during the Clinton administration when Aid To Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) became Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in 1996 (Zylan and Soule 2000). The change, so elegantly captured in the discursive addition of “temporary”, was a broad-based

bi-partisan political enactment of power on the poorest Americans. Designed to “end welfare as we know it”, according to President Bill Clinton, TANF implemented lifetime limits on welfare benefits, increased the role of state mediation of the form benefits would take, and instituted significant variation in means tests to qualify for benefits. In the state of North Carolina, TANF was branded “Work First”. In the program’s own words:

Through Work First, parents can get *short-term training* and other services to help them become employed and self-sufficient, but the responsibility is theirs, and most families have two years to move off Work First Family Assistance. (NC Division of Social Services 2013; emphasis added).

One part of that initiative included employment counseling. My job was to match those on welfare with possible job opportunities. In 2000, that meant sending them out into a labor market where unemployment hovered at around 4 percent. If they could not find a job under those conditions, the next tool in the social services toolkit was to send recipients somewhere for job training. The majority of my clients were women, and of them a little over half were black or Hispanic. For them, job training often lent itself to short-term certificate programs in gendered occupations like allied health care² and cosmetology. The cosmetology program would take approximately seven to nine months while allied health courses could take up to 12 months or longer. Sensitive to life-time limits on their benefits and pressures to re-enter the labor market quickly to escape social stigma, most of my clients chose the cosmetology program even though it was more expensive and had lower labor

² “allied health care” refers to the paraprofessional medical field occupations, e.g. phlebotomists, medical records clerks, and nursing assistants.

market returns. Some area cosmetology schools offered federal student aid programs and others did not. Those that did not were often cheaper but required cash payment. As a result, most of my clients ended up enrolled in the more expensive cosmetology program because they could get a student loan to pay for it. These are some of the ways in which social inequalities and intersecting oppressions manifest offline: political power, obscure language like “block grants” transform the welfare state for the most vulnerable in ways they cannot often understand, labor markets that reproduce gender through occupational segregation also reproduces racial inequalities because black and brown women have fewer social safety nets and higher risks for falling down the mobility ladder.

These are the kinds of experiences that shaped my understanding of online education seven years later as a then doctoral student in the field conducting research. I was studying for-profit colleges like the University of Phoenix³. In large part, I was studying them because an annual list from *Diverse Issues of Higher Education* had listed the University of Phoenix as the top producer of black bachelor’s degree holders in the U.S. (Borden and Brown 2003; Hayes 2010). That struck me as a marked departure for black degree holders who have, historically, been produced by historically black colleges (HBCUS) and public colleges (Anderson 1988; Cole and Omari 2003). What did it mean that for-profit colleges, many of whom leveraged Internet technologies for recruitment and course delivery processes, were graduating so many black degree holders? My experiences with the welfare-to-work program suggested that students who go to school online are likely

³ For-profit colleges are so named because their Internal Revenue Service designation permits extracting profit from tuition revenue to be distributed to owners.

doing so for reasons that manifest from intersections of state power, public policy, historical discrimination, and contemporary disparities. Despite what I knew and what had been documented as true for at least half a century of social science, at the time there were few models to put the literatures on privatization, online education *and* intersecting oppressions in conversation with each other.

There *was* a literature about digital divides in access to the Internet (van Dijk 2006; Hassani 2006). That literature provided one way to conceptualize how “offline” inequalities manifest in online platforms. But several things complicated the analytical utility of digital divides from my perspective. One of the most important of those changes has been the growth of mobile in the U.S. and the diffusion rates of platform adoption (Pew Internet 2013). Greater access did not seem to necessarily ameliorate group differences as it relates to the Internet. One possible reason for what scholars have considered a paradox is classic social theories of status, i.e. how it is achieved, diffused and maintained (Ridgeway 2014). Paul DiMaggio and Eszter Hargittai (2001) offer a multi-dimensional framework of how status, both achieved and ascribed, complicate dialectics of the haves and have-nots. But even these sociologists offer a fairly one-dimensional prediction for the relationship between interlocking stratification processes that occurs when status groups engage institutions. For example, of education and technological access, they “hypothesize that, in the long run, education will be a strong predictor of the use of the Internet for the enhancement of human capital, the development of social capital, and political participation” (2001:13). If, however, sociology of education has contributed anything at all to how we understand education it is that despite

their public relations pitch educational institutions reinforce and reproduce inequalities⁴. Historically, as educational access expands and populations became more heterogeneous, educational institutions in the U.S. have differentiated. That differentiation creates stratified access to cultural and material capital like that DiMaggio and Hargittai hypothesize as democratizing. Since higher education participation in the U.S. has peaked at an all time high (National Center for Education Statistics 2014), as a society we have produced thousands of private sector, unranked for-profit colleges and exactly zero elite colleges and universities. The difference is instructive. Access is easier to produce than is equal access to high status rewards. Similarly, increased Internet access (or “penetration”) may be easier to produce than is egalitarian access to skills, know-how, social networks, and capital. For education, that would mean more online participation may game access while leaving mobility untouched (if not outright reinforcing structural impediments to mobility). Another weakness of digital divide theories was they mostly theorized structural stratification at points prior to digital access. After achieving digital access, digital divide framings tended towards cultural explanations of difference (Hassani 2006). From my perspective of online students in for-profit degree programs, structural stratification manifested at the point of access and beyond, to include group formation and status maintenance. Digital divides may not go far enough to capture the various intersections of privilege,

⁴ There is so much here that oddly rarely crosses the disciplinary divide. I would start with the following key readings for the trajectory of sociology of education: (Bowles and Gintis 2002; Collins 1979; Stevens 2009; Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008)

access, and power that operate online and offline simultaneously and which can also be mutually constitutive⁵.

By 2013 there was a growing literature about alternative credentialing like badging (Ostashewski and Reid 2015; Schmidt-Crawford, Thompson, and Lindstrom 2014) and Massive Open Online Education (MOOCs) (Daniel 2012; Reich 2012). At best, this literature spoke about heterogeneity as a proxy for numerous intersecting inequalities. At the opposite of “at best”, that literature was preoccupied with what I call “roaming autodidacts”. A roaming autodidact is a self-motivated, able learner that is simultaneously embedded in technocratic futures *and* disembedded from place, cultural, history, and markets. The roaming autodidact is almost always conceived as western, white, educated and male. As a result of designing for the roaming autodidact, we end up with a platform that understands learners as white and male, measuring learners’ task efficiencies against an unarticulated norm of western male whiteness. It is not an affirmative exclusion of poor students or bilingual learners or black students or older students, but it need not be affirmative to be effective. Looking across this literature, our imagined educational futures are a lot like science fiction movies: there’s a conspicuous absence of brown people and women.

According to the literature at the time (and still mostly true today), there was no racial or gender component in for-profit college expansion (Chung 2008a, 2008b;

⁵ I am also aware of a parallel and intersecting literature on “digital natives”. This framing recalls linear theories of racial assimilation (e.g. Robert Park) that disquiet me. For a history of linear racial theories one may want to pick up Eduardo Bonilla Silva to consider the complexity of that framing for status groups defined, in significant part, by the legal, political and social inscription of race and social enclosure (1997)

Hentscke, Lechuga, and Tierney 2010; Kinser 2006, 2010; Tierney and Hentschke 2007). The hegemonic narrative said for-profit credentials were instead growing at a rate of over 200 percent (during the sector's highest point of expansion in the early 2000s) because they enrolled "non-traditional" students. It was difficult to square this with the empirical reality of almost three-fourths of for-profit students being women, 1 in 10 of all black college students and 1 in 15 of all Hispanic students being in a for-profit college, and lists like those from *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*. It was, for me, a call for critical social science (as opposed to functionalist), as well as intersectional theories and methods. I embarked on a research study of status groups (race, class, gender and their intersections) in non-traditional higher education organizations, i.e. corporatized, financialized for-profit higher education. Right away I faced a problem for much of data science in a neo-liberal culture: because for-profit colleges are private businesses they are not publicly accessible for data collection and observation⁶. For-profit colleges are not obligated to provide access to independent researchers. And, because the institutions do not have a research imperative the faculty in these institutions are unlikely to research their students. Additionally, few for-profit colleges have physical campuses with unstructured student spaces that can be observed. Despite these severe limitations, students enrolled in for-profit higher education *are* creating spaces for peer interaction and collective meaning making (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005). Some of these spaces are in online social media platforms, such

⁶ For more on the issues of privatization and datafication specific to the institutional context of formal education I suggest Audrey Watters and Jeffrey Alan Johnson (Johnson 2014; Watters 2013)

as Facebook where students exploit the group controls, permissions, and social connections to form informal learning spaces. Their social media content, comprised of posts and peer interactions, constitute digitally mediated autoethnographic narratives of their educational milieus. The digital component is not just for show; it had methodological significance. The platform affords student-users control of how and with whom they share their narrative accounts. Those narratives have been produced without an expectation of performing for the researcher's gaze or approval from important gatekeepers at their institutions. Participation is entirely voluntary and the exchanges are unstructured, unlike surveys or interviews. Additionally, the social media context affords analysis of discourses across time and various interactions. This could reveal patterns harder to identify via survey or interview methods that offer a snapshot of memory or observation. In the tradition of intersectional theory and method, this project sought first to "give voice to the particularity of the perspectives and needs of women of color who often remained invisible" (Marx Ferree and Choo 2010:132). Social media platforms afforded students who are rendered invisible in analysis because of privatization and intellectual enclosure to speak their experiences into legibility.

However, I wanted to move beyond just giving voice to also uncover the ways in which power and privilege are often unmarked in social science research (Bonnett 1996; Zuberi 2008). That is part of intersectionality's political imperative. Essentially, in studying black and Hispanic women in isolation, I could reinforce hierarchies that reify whiteness, especially middle class whiteness on whom the higher education norms are predicated. Take for instance, why we think for-profit

colleges are a bad choice. They are bad because anyone with “sense” chooses a “real” college, i.e. a not-for-profit college as high up the institutional prestige hierarchy as one’s academic record and finances will allow. Ipso facto, much of the research on for-profit colleges starts from bad choices of for-profit students as evidence of a social problem. That for-profit students are disproportionately black, Hispanic and female adds to the stigma of those at the margins of intersecting oppression and reinforces the natural superiority of those who are not. I did not want to buy a ticket to that party. To resist doing so I had to approach the social media data I collected as autoethnographies rather than content. While content can absolutely be analyzed as narratives, they are most often analyzed as quantitative abstractions or without attention to qualitative differences in the power that frame content. In contrast, ethnographic data’s imperative is to situate meaning among various relational dynamics like power, privilege and social location (Ellis and Bochner 2006). Autoethnographies resist hegemonic sensemaking paradigms by centering self-authored texts and the co-construction of meaning. Several key findings emerged that point towards the potential for intersectionality theory and methods in studying the Internet.

Privacy versus Hypervisibility

This study of black and Hispanic women earning online PhDs in marginalized for-profit colleges problematized the utility of privacy online. There has been a rich conversation about what constitutes privacy in online spaces with concerns about how tracking, cookies, and private data caching constitute a form of surveillance (Barnes 2006; Daries et al. 2014). Often, the most vulnerable are centered in these

discussions to draw stark emotional lines around the scope of the problem. For example, privacy debates have frequently centered on youth and teenagers, presumably children and young adults are especially vulnerable (Livingstone 2008; Youn 2005). Most of this literature assumes, if not explicitly argues, that privacy is most fragile for socially vulnerable groups. If I take as a point of departure that black women and Hispanic women constitute a group that are often marginalized by social, economic and cultural processes then it would follow that we should err on the side of *more* privacy controls for these groups. However, analyses of these students, in this particular institutional context, suggest that privacy can compound students' marginality rather than ameliorate it.

Most of the students in my study found the online support group through 1) Facebook ads and 2) secondary ties with group members. Because the group is restricted to women, gendered network ties predisposed members to finding out about the group. And, because three-fourths of the group members are black or Hispanic, those network ties hinged on shared ascription among group members. The group moderator, Janice, said she used Facebook profile pictures to screen potential new members. Profiles without evidence of gender were denied. From the students' perspective, sharing members' ascribed status in the group increased social trust. That trust is very important when the group is a platform for co-creating meaning around sensitive topics like debt and academic performance. One member, Lisa, says that her online school used to require all of the students to post their real pictures and to engage in online discussion groups. After some students complained that the posting requirement was burdensome, the school dropped the

requirement. Lisa says without the user profile images and online group requirement, she did not know how to judge her academic performance (and fears about it) relative to the other students' social location. There was little to be learned from comparing herself to a white male student, for example. She could assume that he did not share similar time constraints because of childcare arrangements⁷. His performance in the class was not meaningful for Lisa because she intuited that his social location afforded him resources that she did not have. In contrast, Lisa said the members of the online Facebook group being all women "mattered" because "I know they know what I go through". She trusts that the group moderator has properly screened members and Facebook profile images reinforces this trust is well placed. For the women in this group the kind of privacy often discussed in among researchers and policymakers would blunt a tool for educational persistence. Not knowing who the group members are would make Lisa less likely to use the online support group, a group she credits for pushing her to degree completion.

This kind of complicated relationship with privacy goes beyond the institutional context of formal education. Take for example recent debates on Twitter about "stealing" tweets (Wong 2014). There is a whole brand of (mostly digital) journalism that culls social media content for stories. Many users have pushed back against this practice, saying that their content is used without their express permission. There is a procedural debate about the chain of ownership given terms and conditions, private ownership, and public diffusions. That is

⁷ And at the aggregate level, those assumptions would match data that continue to show gendered, classed, and racialized differences in everything from parental care responsibilities, care work, extended kin support, and the experience of the "time bind".

another debate. However, there is something about the difference between privacy and hypervisibility to be learned from these tensions. Context collapse offers some much needed clarity to the debate about media institutions borrowing tweets from marginalized groups who use the platform for consciousness-raising, networking and finding community. Context collapse, broadly, is about how we switch our performance depending on who is watching.⁸ We decide how to act based on who is around because we know that not all people are created equal. And when we might need access to privileged resources like, say, jobs, we act differently around audiences we presume are comprised of people who govern access to jobs.

Context collapse has mostly been about the control tweeters can exert over how and when and where I perform the identity I think most appropriate for a situation. But media organizations' "tweet borrowing" strips tweeters of that autonomy. They do this through institutional power to reallocate amplification. By virtue of being media and a company, these institutions are more powerful than most of its users and content producers. They have greater amplification power and more money to spend drowning out individual resistance and more protection when they make a mistake than do persons. Because they are charged with keeping political power in check, media organizations get more benefit of the doubt than persons. Because of the difference in power, media can force context collapse that may not have happened without its intervention. Thought of another way, I sign up

⁸ danah boyd cites Goffman as the intellectual tradition of "context collapse". Exercising a little academic iteration, I prefer to think of context collapse's intellectual tradition as DuBoisian. Not only does it call to mind DuBois' classic double-consciousness dialectic. But as I use it and think through it, double-consciousness engages the political economy of ascription in ways useful to think of context collapse as it relates to intersecting power relations and institutions.

for Twitter assuming the ability to hide in plain sight when my amplification power is roughly equal to a few million other non-descript content producers. Media amplification changes that assumption and can do so without my express permission. Like the students in my study, it appears that marginalized groups find value in hypervisibility precisely because it affords them something blanket privacy may not while preserving the aspects of it that work for their purposes.

Hypervisibility makes one's social location legible, through images, discourse, language and affective practices. I am a part of "black Twitter" precisely because other users can encode and decode these signals to locate me in shared discursive practices on an open, private media platform. As long as the power to amplify is kept in check, hypervisibility affords me community without the burden of excessive interrogation. It is hiding in plain sight. In contrast, blunt attempts at privacy like those that happened at Lisa's for-profit online college, became a hindrance. Nixing student photos and the discussion board requirement compounded Lisa's feeling of institutional isolation. The difference could impact our objective measures of inequality and mobility, i.e. educational attainment, persistence, and occupational access. As one student said when friends expressed concern about using her real name in her online educational communities because it would signal to gatekeepers that she is a black woman, "Hell, my name is LaKeisha. Changing that doesn't stop me from being black." Changing the performance of marginality online does not change the offline marginality for people who live in both simultaneously. And, the context of the online use matters. Earning a credential is serious business with serious risks and rewards. For black women who bear the brunt of controlling

images (Collins 1996, 2000) that circumscribe their social mobility, educational attainment is an important social signal. These controlling images, or hegemonic tropes, circulate in Internet memes. The controlling image of Sapphire, a fast-talking loud-mouthed and angry black woman, persists in memifications of black women's images with text like "I'm a strong black woman who don't need no man":



Those kinds of persistent controlling images are always a specter in the shadow for the students I interviewed. Credentials were a way of resisting racist sexist tropes of social deviance. When the stakes are that high, the students I interviewed relied on signals of social inclusion like images, moderator screening, and discursive practices. They were trying to minimize their exposure to powerful actors, often understood as the "white gaze" (Bonnett 1996), while navigating institutional contexts where that is impossible. At best, they could use social media platforms to

erect porous boundaries to define the composition of their digital student lounges. But to build those boundaries the members had to use the very aspects of identity that many privacy controls would minimize. Facebook's architecture was most amenable to this kind of malleable hypervisibility, affording privacy while also designing the platform around social signals that made the students feel safe in the online community. What we learn from this intersectional approach to LaKeisha, Lisa and Janice's approach to online privacy is that certain types of privacy are privileges that some groups cannot pretend to have if the Internet is to be useful for their purposes.

Algorithmic Stratification

That study of women in online PhDs was instructive not only because of its findings but for how the group found me. I am black. I am a woman. I have been a Facebook user for twelve years. My educational affiliations are listed in my biography. Some combination of those identities and behaviors filtered me through Facebook's (proprietary) algorithms and one day listed this Facebook group in my newsfeed. I had no prior affiliations with any members of the group. None of them were Facebook friends. Interviews suggested that many in the group found it through similar algorithmic means. They were placed in each other's path by the invisible hand of Internet sorting, stratifying and signaling that defines much of our Internet experience without our knowing it. Media studies scholar Ian Bogost recently challenged those of us obsessed with attributing all manner of things to the power of algorithms to "replace the term with "God" and ask yourself if the meaning changes" (Bogost 2015). It is a blasé kind of appeal to our fascination with

euphemisms for those structural processes we would rather not unpack. But Bogost's challenge is useful if we think about what it can elucidate. Depending on one's place in the hierarchy of intersecting oppressions, whether it's a private algorithm or God the effect is the same and recourse for resistance equally daunting. It is through this framework of intersectionality, or attention to power and institutions, that greater sustained focus on *algorithmic stratification* portends future directions for Internet studies. By algorithmic stratification I mean the processes by which commonly illegible datafication contours life chances for groups based on 1) their social location and 2) their relationship with critical institutions.

In this conceptualization of how algorithms interact with structural inequalities through institutional processes I draw on Fourcade and Healy's work on classification situations (2013). Rooted in classic Weberian models of occupational and social stratification, *classification situations* refer to the way institutions systematically "sort and slot people into new types of categories with different economic rewards or punishments attached to them" (2013:561). Fourcade and Healy use as an example the way in which credit scores conditioned the disproportionate devastation of the 2008 housing crisis (and subsequent near global financial collapse). Markets mostly controlled credit scoring as neo-liberalism degraded public services. These means of sorting and stratifying were largely illegible to those who needed the scores to participate under the new rules of financialization but who did not have the wealth to buffer them from its risks. Fourcade and Healy make the analogy to redlining, or the practice of excluding African Americans from living in white neighborhoods. Like redlining, algorithms do

not just give us a personal Internet. These algorithms also stratify group-based access to critical institutions like markets, financial institutions, education, and work. And going further than do the authors, I would argue that eventually capital is reorganized to correspond with algorithmic efficiencies. This would reinforce structural inequalities. Working through these “offline” institutions, algorithms stratify life chances by routinizing aspects of the social locations that predate them. For the least powerful, algorithms really are like God – unknowable and increasingly omniscient and omnipotent. Sure you can get around these algorithms but as wealthy Catholics in the 16th century once bought indulgences, doing so will cost you.

The price for getting around algorithmic sorting and stratifying is not absolute but relative. Here is where I think intersectional frameworks’ focus on process and institutional interconnections builds on Fourcade and Healy’s classification situations. It’s the old debate about whether social locations are additive or integrative. Does class inequality produce gender and race inequality or are they in combination something specific? If we take the integrative approach to intersecting oppressions and their account of structural power, then we must consider how algorithmic stratification conditions life chances beyond just class. I will return to my studies of for-profit colleges for an example. As I noted previously, the hegemonic narrative about the rapid expansion of for-profit colleges attributed it to the sector’s success with enrolling “non traditional” students. They offered “flexible” online courses that appealed to busy working adults. Working adults and non-traditional students is a discursive collapse of several intersecting inequalities:

gendered time gaps, racial inequalities in educational access to college preparatory curriculums, class inequalities in reliance on public sector labor markets, and a growing service economy that disproportionately impact the life chances of the poor and working class. Students classified in the literature as “non-traditional” comprise half of all students enrolled in degree-granting institutions (Deil-Amen 2012)

Despite comprising a significant number of all college students, non-traditional students are marked as different from traditional students. The distinction has utility because of ideological, cultural distinctions about normativity, race, class, and gender. Deil-Amen says, “Our conceptions of the typical idealized college student are based on traditional notions and an imagined norm of someone who begins college immediately after high school, enrolls full-time, lives on campus, and is ready to begin college level classes” (2011:2). Traditional notions and imagined norms are allusions to cultural ideologies about an ideal student type. Like the ideal worker type (Kelly et al. 2010), these ideologies begin as material realities. When higher education organizations were defining their institutional norms, *de rigueur* and *de facto* segregation prevented women, non-whites, and non-elite status groups from participating in higher education. The ideal student type has persisted despite socio-political extra-institutional changes like demography patterns. When we unpack the categorical definition of “non traditional student” we find intersectional oppressions lurking just beyond the neologism.

To recruit status groups similarly vulnerable because of those intersecting oppressions, for-profit colleges became one of the single biggest Internet advertisers in history. In 2012, the Apollo Group, the largest for-profit college

company and owner of the University of Phoenix brand, spent \$400,000 a day in Google ads alone. For-profit colleges made the “jobs and education” sector the fourth-highest industry advertising on the major search engine and e-commerce platform (McMillan Cotton 2014). And of that sector, the top five advertisers also happened to be the largest national for-profit college chains. Together, they spent more than \$1.1 billion in online advertising with a single search engine in 2011. For-profit colleges also kept “lead generation aggregators” in business after their other major client, the mortgage industry, took a hit during the Great Recession. Lead generation aggregators capture user content, ostensibly under the guise of providing free college information. They then sell that customer information to for-profit colleges who use it to recruit new students. Senators in 2013 wrote to the Federal Trade Commission about lead generators that they “have become a key part of the aggressive recruiting strategy for many for-profit colleges and they “deceive consumers to obtain personal information by misrepresenting their affiliation with for-profit colleges, as well as concealing how and by whom their information will be used.” Googling for “college grant money” is a practice in information democracy. Wealthier students, or those with the cultural know-how to navigate the complicated student aid process, often know about grants and loans. Students without the benefit of that cultural largesse do not. The Internet makes finding that information more accessible. But lead aggregators and privatized relationships between the financial sector and educational institutions use algorithms to skew searches in favor of capital interests. When my Google is no longer everybody’s

Google, my structural inequalities are transposed into new kinds of ephemeral inequalities through algorithms I cannot see, touch or easily contest.

For a thought experiment of what such an approach might look like, let us consider again a status group for the purposes of for-profit college expansion. They targeted non-traditional students. Non-traditional students are not defined just by descriptors like age or parental status. They are also defined in opposition to the ideal norm of a “traditional” student. A traditional student is not only unfettered and younger than 24 years old. She is also adequately prepared for college level coursework. Benefitting from the vast educational industrial complex of tutors, sports leagues, essay coaches, college application consultants and standardized test prep certainly helps one be prepared for college level coursework (Stevens 2009). So, too, does parental income and wealth that strongly correlates with the neighborhood segregation that drives group differences in access to high performing K-12 schools in the U.S.(Massey and Denton 1988; Massey and Fischer 2006).⁹ All of those resources, both the material and cultural, also provide prospective students with a fairly good cognitive map of the institutional prestige that defines U.S. higher education. Knowing what a small liberal arts college (SLAC) means in real, practical terms is an example of the kind of cognitive maps born of privilege and wealth. When an algorithm is calibrated to capture attention for non-elite, low status, controversial forms of school like a for-profit college, it would be most efficient if it targets groups without the capital to know that the University of Phoenix is not a SLAC. Targeting inequality is transformed into a technical efficiency.

⁹ If I had one wish I would think long and hard about using it to make Massey et al.’s “The Source of the River” required reading for all conversation about technology and education.

If those targeted messages resonate across social locations it is likely because those groups share similar levels of resources to discern types of colleges or are similarly constrained in their ability to choose among different types of colleges. An analytical focus on race, absent a consideration of the cumulative and integrated effects race with class and gender, can easily lead one to conclude, “race is not a significant predictor of enrollment” in for-profit colleges as Chung finds in a recent study (2013). That may be both true and false if race is a social location rather than biological characteristics (as many social scientists have long argued); and if intersecting relations to power racializes gender and class positions. Focusing on the process by which attention is stratified using technical affordances like lead generators and search algorithms reveals those complexities in ways other analytical frameworks do not.

Status groups are constantly morphing but the power relationships that define status groups are remarkably stable. Focusing on categorical descriptions to the exclusion of process conflates *compositional* change for *structural* change. In the case of for-profit colleges, they need not singularly recruit black students or poor students or female students to recruit from those groups in significant proportions. They needed only to target the shared vulnerabilities among those various social locations. Once that is done – flexible online classes you take from anywhere after the kids are asleep – technology makes targeting those vulnerabilities efficient and scalable. Broadly conceived, algorithmic stratification captures the shifting landscape of intersectional groups; macro changes in economies and policy that bracket how the Internet works; and, the conditions under which groups use the

Internet for critical institutional engagements. Importantly, algorithmic stratification would attend to class but not only class. If the aim is to understand the nature of contemporary inequality, there is value in discerning the life chances of poor white women in Western nations distinctly from those of poor second generation Congolese immigrants in a Western nation. Algorithmic stratification would account for the intersections of history and biography that define integrative intersectionality under contemporary structural conditions. As privatization complicates datafication, neo-liberalism weakens social reforms, and capital further inserts its way into how we live our daily lives on the Internet, intersectionality is critical to Internet studies and social science. Algorithmic stratification's focus on process, both online and off, across intersecting power relations is a way to move our study of contemporary inequalities forward in times that demand nothing less.

Intersectionality bridges gaps in current theory and method in Internet Studies, as well as various other disciplinary modes of studying the Internet. In my study of minority women in online for-profit degree programs intersectionality complicated common prescriptions for privacy, suggesting that calibrations of an Internet for everybody cannot be tuned for a typical user without exacerbating the very inequalities we hope the Internet can redress. As critical institutional arrangements are increasingly mitigated by (often proprietary) digital platforms, intersectionality gives us a framework to consider how these contexts contour access differently. All evidence points towards a future where platforms and algorithms mediate everything from healthcare and education to civic participation and labor participation. If classification situations urge us to consider the role of

algorithms in reproducing class inequalities, then thinking more broadly about class as an intersectional social location strengthens the utility of algorithmic studies in understanding contemporary social inequalities.

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