Images of Black People in Popular Media & Fandom: User Analysis and Community Building using Tumblr as an Archival Space

Abstract:

The LIS field is persistent in discussing the racial and class divide of technological access, especially for low income African Americans. Collectively, the field ignores the ever growing online presence of African Americans on social media platforms. However, in the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the power of online community that exists on these platforms (Black Twitter, Black Facebook, etc) can no longer be ignored. My goal was to investigate how the Black presence on social platforms could be utilized to encourage new scholarship and utilization of materials housed in Special Collections. Tumblr specifically was chosen because it possessed a significant portion of my target users, and is a platform becoming more commonly deployed by academic libraries for curation and scholarly outreach. Using Tumblr, I created an online community around the representation and reception of Black people in popular media and fandom. Tumblr’s internal data and Google analytics provided key information about the content and the audiences reception to it. I observed both increases in the number of visitors and a steady number of return visitors interested in the content being posted.

Keywords: Fandom studies, African American/Black, Popular Culture studies, Tumblr
Why Tumblr: An Introduction

In the last decade, the online presence and participation of African American communities and scholarship has largely gone unremarked upon until the eruption against police brutality against black (predominately male) bodies ensconced within the 2013 and still ongoing social protest movement, #BlackLivesMatter. Prior to the visibility of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Black Twitter was a prime source of critical engagement with both scholarship and popular culture. YouTube (2005) has been the go-to repository for health information, hair-care tips, and mental/emotional self-care for African American professional women as far back as 2007 when the idea of simply sharing videos for entertainment expanded to encompass vlogging (maintaining a weekly or daily video diary). The last 10 years has been extraordinary in terms of African American presence on and engagement with social media outlets. A strong sense of intimacy is created between the person originating content on social media sites and the viewers who seek to stay engaged with current culturally relevant information. In short, community in its most basic form is restructured through particular digital spaces—for this reason certain social media platforms have emerged as more accessible than others in terms of utility. While Twitter has been one such platform, another one has been Tumblr.

Originally created as personal blogging site by a 14 year-old David Karp in 2007, Tumblr blossomed into a site where people “could connect through ideas rather than relationships.”¹ The site search function deployed in the website design prepopulates tags as they are being entered based on the recognition of other commonly used tags, which means it runs an algorithm that learns repeated patterns input by users.² These tags are important as they can lead users to other similarly tagged content. Likewise, the tags can also be viewed as an archive (this means more of at the level of various sub collections within the whole), with content sorted according to particular tags. Next, the site is designed so that content is accessible to those with and without a Tumblr account. Depending on the user status the layout of the account looks different. Users have a selection of free and paid templates from which they may select a layout for audiences who are not on Tumblr to view their website. In May of 2013 Karp’s platform became an acquisition of Yahoo, causing some controversy with its community of users who felt that the aims of a for-profit company would interfere

¹ David Karp expresses this point more fully in a CNNMoney interview.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWpi9oFarz0

² In David Nield’s article “What is the Point of Tracked Tags on Tumblr,” he explains that “Tumblr does not dictate specific rules for using tags -- any word or phrase can be applied as a tag -- and so tracked tags are also very flexible. You can use them to find posts related to a specific company, a particular market, a current news story, an author or anything else you’re interested in. Essentially they act as bookmarks for content you don’t want to miss on the Tumblr network, and tracking these tags means you don’t have to remember a list of search terms every time you open up the site.”
with their various user interests and personal collections. Tumblr has come to occupy a significant space in terms of the community building and archiving of collections around individual figures, themes, historical periods, etc. Yet, the minor changes made to the platform once it was acquired by Yahoo has only encouraged the steady growth of the microblogging site. Tumblr continues to function as the premier space for sharing content. Despite this fact, the scholarship available on Tumblr and its archival and intellectual function for various ethnic and special interest groups, African Americans in particular, remains grossly understudied.3

While Tumblr makes up only ten percent of the total reported social media usage, there are some other interesting facets associated with its user population that should be of primary interest for all Library and Information Science professionals, especially those focusing on outreach and engagement. Maeve Duggan, author of “Mobile Messaging and Social Media,” collected stats via telephone interviews. The further breakdown of her demographic stats revealed that for the total percentage of users, those identifying as either African American or Latino were represented in disproportionately high concentrations. Both groups representing 15 percent of the total usage population. In addition, despite its reputation as a social media platform popular among teenagers, the actual age demographics reported by users leaned heavily towards adult: 20 percent fell between the ages of 18-29, while another 11 percent spanned the 30-49 age bracket. These users reported income earning levels that suggested 16 percent of them earned less than $30,000/yr, while (at the high end of reported income earnings) 11 percent made at least or more than $75,000/yr. This means that the persistent economic gap that continues to define American values and politics in the 21st century is being bridged. Finally, Tumblr also boasts a disproportionately high number of users who have some college level education—roughly 13 percent. The statistics collected by Duggan, who was more interested in understanding the overall picture of social media usage, suggests that while Tumblr may be small in terms of overall population of users when compared to both Twitter and Facebook, it is a vital space for intellectual exchange among educated “new” and “middle” aged adults in African American and Latino communities.

Tumblr, a social platform blending the microblogging aspect of Twitter with the capriciousness of media posting found on Pinterest, is thus instrumental in reaching audiences across both the scholarly and digital access divide. Unfortunately, Tumblr is not being used as the choice medium for presenting content to diverse audiences. Academic libraries, Archives, and Special Collection units across the United States are overlooking a great platform in their ongoing attempts at reaching a wider range of users. The fluidity of Tumblr is

3 “African Americans and Technology Use: A Demographic Study,” reported that “Social networking site adoption is identical among white and black internet users: 72% of online whites and 73% of online blacks use online social networks. For both whites and blacks, social networking site usage is near-ubiquitous among students and young adults (some 96% of black internet users ages 18-29 are social networking site users) (10)."
what makes it the perfect medium for scholars of pop cultural and African American studies to bridge together the “personal archive” they create with university and state lead historical archives. For those whose scholarship exists at the nexus of African American studies and popular culture, the idea of the archive remains steeped in a sense of “the forbidden,” and seems like a completely extraneous if not “irrelevant” source of information. In using Tumblr scholars are able to circumnavigate the dual issues of access and perceived relevance that has become the “de facto” reasoning behind the failure of many scholars and students to interact with traditional archival spaces. Tumblr allows pop cultural scholars to not only visually access resources that otherwise would remain invisible, and perhaps be deemed as “unimportant” by current archival preservation practice. In addition, Tumblr also allows these scholars to exchange ideas and thoughts via its blogging format and to be part of an already active and engaged intellectual online community.

**Scope and the Scholarly Limitations of the Project**

Fandom studies scholar, Henry Jenkins’ broke fandom into three components: media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence. The important aspect of Jenkins theory is that “relations between producers and consumers are breaking down as consumers seek to act upon the invitation to participate in the life of the franchises” (20). Continuing with Jenkins’ thread of media convergence, Paul Booth’s *Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age* (2015) explains, “today’s fan/industry relationship reflects both active audiences, who have the ability, the desire, and the technology to interact, change, and play with the media, and media producers who have access to the same technologies and are making use of them to find new ways of marketing and designing media products for those same audiences” (5). Thus, to simplify, fandom is both the outpouring of expressive culture shared between audiences for a particular show, film, character, etc. as well as the

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4 Pew Research’s 2012 study, “The Demographics of Social Media Users,” reported that “Tumblr is significantly less popular among internet users than the other social networking sites featured in this report. Just 6% of those online use the site. It is much more popular, however, among the youngest cohort — 13% of those 18-29 are blogging on Tumblr” (7). In a follow up study in 2015, “Mobile Messaging and Social Media,” it was discovered that “One-in-ten online adults (10%) use Tumblr, a slight increase from the 6% who did so the last time Pew Research asked in December 2012. As with many of the platforms and services discussed in this report, young adults are especially likely to use Tumblr: 20% of online adults age 18 to 29 do so” (7). Not only is Tumblr in the midst of a shift in the increase in users, it would seem that the demographic shift has moved from teenagers to college aged adults. It should be noted that since the last Pew report Tumblr has aggressively changed the capabilities of the site to be more compatible with mobile phones, which is a primary tool of internet access for African Americans and others with low income.

5 In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Collide* (2007) Jenkins defines the gist of convergence as “more than simply a technological shift. Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences” (15-16).
participation in various ongoing individual and community activities that define the ways in which audiences engage and identify with the shows’ subject(s) or narrative. Fandom can take the shape of art, writing, cosplay, reading or discussion groups, and organized conventions, all of which are highly participatory and self-reflexive.

As part of the overall engagement portion of the Tumblr project, I turned to those collections housed in the University of Iowa’s Special Collections department that were related to fandom. In my approach to the topic of Tumblr and using it as an archive to bridge gaps, I initially had made the assumption that since some of these collections spanned from the 1960s to now there would be a rather significant pool of representation given that the period from the mid-1960s to 1970s marked the rise in family television series aimed at African American viewers (Sanford & Sons, The Jeffersons, and Thelma to name a few).6 I was sure that I would find at least letters and fan club memorabilia associated with these television shows whose primary target audience was African American. However, in discussing with the curator of the collection and pulling the finding aids associated with the Fandom collection, I quickly discovered that there were multiple issues spawning from the collection practices of the University of Iowa that presented a significant barrier to attaining enough material to support weekly if not daily updates to the Tumblr page that I was imagining.

First, of the fandom collection—it was geared towards those television shows which are housed under the umbrella of science fiction. Star Trek, Star Wars, and The Man From U.N.C.L.E. seemed to be overwhelmingly represented across all sub-collections within Fandom. Initially, the lack of diverse representation in the Special Collections archive was speculated to be because African Americans simply did not attend conventions in the 1970s—it may have been cost prohibitive and (as is more likely) a space in which they felt distinctly ostracized from participating. To counter this, I shifted my focus to science fiction and fantasy and depictions of black characters on these shows. However, even when looking at series being produced in the 1990s, which is a remarkable in terms of shows having a more racially/ethnically diverse range of characters—the fandom archive remained decidedly centered on the various possible relationships between white protagonists and antagonists. As such, I realized that what I was seeing was an issue with the University of Iowa’s Special Collection practice—which basically boils down to the fact that a significant portion of materials for the collection are donated or purchased from individual collectors. This means that the University Special Collections is irrevocably

6 Aside from all of the stereotypic and borderline racist tropes in the narrative and highly problematic characterizations, these are the shows that impacted America’s evolving race relations after the stigma of the Moynihan Report and height of the Civil Rights movement. The 1980s, because of some of the stereotypic tropes evoked by the family dramas of the 1970s, ushered in the focus on education, race, and class that made the success of a show such as The Cosby’s and later A Different World possible. Likewise, the 1990s was the definitive era of black sitcoms, films, and of black character development. This is further worth noting given the abrupt turn and drop of African American characters from television shows with primetime spots beginning roughly around 2001.
shaped by the interests of these individual donors. Thus, one of the major and persistently reproduced blind spots across all of the sub collections in Fandom is the erasure of many characters of color from the archive produced.7

One notable exception found in the Fandom collection has been Nichelle Nichols, and her role as Uhura on *Star Trek*. While there are many reasons a character such as Uhura would be remembered (first on-screen intra-racial kiss in America, first black woman on a primetime television show not playing the role of a domestic, her real life affair with a married Gene Roddenberry, etc). There are number of reasons why Uhura has remained a sustainable figure in fandom, however, another reason may be because she was one of a few African American actors with a fan club that held evets, and produced at fanzine to which she contributed. The presence of fan clubs around a figure such as Nichelle, means that their were members who must also have participated in the convention circuit as the materials they produced eventually ended up in the hands of a collector who regularly attends such events. In fact, the presence of Uhura within the Fandom collection stands out given how little the interaction is with any other character of color on any show found within Special Collections.8 As someone who did not identify with the Star Trek fandom, I knew that I could not simply devote my Tumblr to Nichelle Nichols and Uhura. However, by encountering this lack of resources within the academic archive I realized that this was the problem in which so many scholars in popular culture and television studies often run into, which is, my canon is not your canon. Fandom is generational, and responds most succinctly to the attributes that makes one show or character iconic, which often hinges on bringing the repressed elements or conversation of various groups into mainstream reality. Thus, it is possible to create a vast collection of materials from a wide range of groups on a popular show that only represents a liminal selection of characterization. But, to reproduce an entire archive that continues to erase the history and legacies of characters and their relationships with viewers. This is just one example of the scholarly gap that I seek to bridge between the collections housed in the academic archive and the collections being created on social media sites such as Tumblr.

The Tumblr I created focused on issues of characterization because it is a major point that is most interesting and relevant for African American pop

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7 This is in alignment with a point raised by Mario Ramirez in his essay, “Being Assumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative” (2014). Ramirez explains: “Notwithstanding efforts to the contrary, the archival profession in turn continues to suffer from the ongoing marginalization of change and difference due to its inability to recognize the normative whiteness that continues to lie at the heart of its motivations” (348).

8 To expand on the significance of this within the world of archival practice, I refer the reader to Anthony W. Dunbar’s “Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation started” (2006). As he explains, Critical Race Theory (CRT) has three methodological components: counter stories, macroaggressions, and social justice. Uhara as presented within the realm of the Fandom collection is a figure surrounded by a deluge of missed on screen opportunities and real life narratives that surrounded her actress, Nichelle Nichols.
cultural studies. Tumblr is the place where the historical and contemporary conversations on characters presented in mainstream media is being carried out at this very moment. Often, Tumblr users identify and collect materials where there is a weaving together of interests in representation, writing, and the development of characters who are of color in context with larger environmental and social justice issues. Given the tight window in which I had to launch the initial project—I limited the scope of my archive to the issues of characterization being discussed across a wide variety of media formats. This included characters of color (predominately African Americans) from television shows and movies that fall under science-fiction or sci-fi fantasy, comic book heroes and heroines from both Marvel and DC comic labels, and any articles discussing diversity and diverse representation in writing, film, and television. Keeping in mind that I was attempting to both shape and produce a conversation—I re-blogged a lot from various sources and returned to Special Collection to try and pull relevant content for the audience that I was hoping to cultivate, in this case I was hoping to appeal to African Americans and acafans who participate at some level in media based fandom. In the section that follows, I will discuss in more detail how I built up a community of followers, what type of materials I have posted from the University of Iowa’s Special Collections, and any resulting conversations or spaces where these images have been re-blogged.

References:


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9 “Acafans” is a term introduced by fandom studies scholar Henry Jenkins to discuss scholars who are also fans of the material of which they study. (Referencing definition supplied by Rebecca Wanzo’s “African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies”).