## Chapter 3 – Digital Media

*Javier Rivera (University of Southern California)*

In July 1993, *The New Yorker* magazine published the now iconic cartoon by Peter Steiner with the caption “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” The cartoon’s image displays a dog seated at a desktop computer vocalizing the caption to a fellow dog who seems fixated by the implication of the statement. The cartoon represents what are now historical narratives of what the Internet and the proliferation of what “the digital” as an emergent media technology would mean for society. The cartoon also reflects popular narratives in the 1990s about the Internet as a space where you can be whoever you want to be without experiencing the social ills of bias and judgement. In line with ideas of a techno-utopian society where discourses of race mimic those of colorblind ideologies, such ideas of emergent information technologies reflect the bulk of the critique in early Internet studies (Nakamura and Chow-White). Therefore, much of the early research and public attention at the time was geared towards the Internet as a representational space, the digital divide, and the idea that simply increasing access to digital technology would amount to a more equitable society. While equal access is imperative, the terrain of digital technologies in the 21st century reveals that unequal access is but one of the many areas which require our attention.

Even within the context of the **digital divide**, or the unequal access to new media technologies along ethnoracial and socioeconomic lines, US Latinxs complicate the conversation on what disparities in access look like. Disparities in digital media use exist among US Latinxs along measures of age, language, and immigrant status where usage is higher for Latinxs under 50 years of age, those that consume English-only content, and those who are born in the United States. While access should be of concern for scholars and policy makers, it should not be ignored that US Latinxs overwhelming use the Internet for entertainment, social media, and as a source of news (Retis). With most US Latinx users who consume digital media preferring English-language content, we have seen the spread of sites across platforms which cater to Latinx art, culture, and media such as Buzzfeed’s *Pero Like*, *Mitú*, and *Remezcla*, to name a few.

<Fig. 1.1 here.> *Screenshot of Pero Like’s “Latinos Take a Spanish Test” video.*

Beyond these multimedia projects, Latinx users overrepresent online content creators on various social media platforms such as YouTube which signals the importance of online media as sites of cultural production and political action (Negrón-Muntaner et al.).

Considering the context of digital media usage for US Latinxs outlined above, this chapter will focus on the field of digital media studies and its contributions. By doing so, a set of tools will be provided to better understand how the proliferation of new technologies influence areas in media such as the convergence of traditional film and television industries with online streaming platforms, and how the cultural productions and social movements of US Latinxs in online space shape and are shaped by platform affordances and technological infrastructures.

With shows such as *East Los High* (2013-2017) and *One Day at a Time* (2017-2020) bringing a US Latinx presence to online streaming platforms Hulu and Netflix respectively, it is important to consider both continuing and shifting frames of analysis needed to evaluate post-network Latinx film and television. For example, issues of inclusion in traditional media industries of broadcast and cable television have become increasingly relevant as streaming platforms such as Hulu and Netflix have begun to produce their own original content within the last ten years. Online streaming platforms provide access to Latinx producers whether it be through production companies or social media streaming services such as YouTube. Latinx web producers have been found to participate in a “media-by-any-means-necessary.” This practice reflects a US Latinidad which is heterogeneous and at times oppositional towards dominant narratives of ethnoracial identity (Rodríguez and Beltrán). With the increasing consideration of online streaming services within film and television studies, technological affordances of production, funding, and what determines a show’s cancellation become sites and strategies that require scholarly attention. This includes an expansion of what it means to study representation, production, circulation, and audience reception in a post-network era.

An illustrative example of this shifting terrain is the cancellation of the Netflix series *One Day at a Time* (ODAAT) in 2019. Based on the 1970s sitcom with the same name, *One Day at a Time* centers a Cuban American family living in Los Angeles who frequently tackled politically pertinent issues from immigration to homophobia. However, in March 2019 it was announced that the show would be cancelled after its third season. Soon enough the hashtag #SaveODAAT began trending on the social media site Twitter. This reaction demonstrates what has now become a regular act of audience response to the cancellation of television series in the social networking landscape of the 21st century. The series was brought back for a final season but was cancelled for a second time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This dynamic landscape of social media visibility and traditional media industries warrants a consideration for the ways digital media affects conversations of production, representation, and audience.

### Platforms as Sites of Social Connection

To return to the cartoon that opens this chapter, the idea that “On the internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” refers to an increasingly unpopular notion that social connections in online space somehow lie outside of lived reality. More accurately, online cultures are a product of an interactive relationship between the technological infrastructures that facilitate new and enduring modes of connection and the desire for groups of people to imagine themselves as a part of a larger community. To consider how digital media promotes both new and old forms of social relationships, this section outlines how platforms and their infrastructures can be analyzed to understand the mediation of social ties.

In her study of the ways teenagers use social media, digital media scholar danah boyd outlines how **networked publics** serve as the ways that people participate in communities that are larger than themselves. boyd describes networked publics as publics which are “simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (8). **Social media**, which can be considered broadly to consist of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook, blogs, video sharing sites such as YouTube, and any other online platform that allows users to create their own content and facilitates interaction between groups of people in much of the same way as other public spaces have done and continue to do so. It is important to consider what **technological affordances**, or modes of interaction that are made possible or encouraged by networked technologies, certain online platforms promote to their users. Affordances of online platforms to consider include persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability (boyd). The microblogging social media site Twitter will be used to describe each of these affordances however, many social media sites shape interactions using these and other affordances. Persistence can be described as the ability for online content to linger. While digital content is notorious for its ephemeral nature, meaning once something is produced online it can be deleted and lost, social media platforms facilitate a persistent nature of content production. For example, Twitter will present to you a timeline of tweets from those you follow ranging from minutes to hours or longer after they have been produced. Visibility allows for an audience to witness your content. On Twitter, the now popular hashtag is a platform affordance that can allow not only your followers, but those who search the hashtag to see your content, thus increasing its visibility. Spreadability describes how content is encouraged to be shared. This can be in the form of hyperlinks or built-in features on platforms such as the retweet function on Twitter. Finally, searchability affords an ease to find content and therefore promote interactions among users in ways that were not considered when the content was originally made. For example, users with fan accounts of their favorite artist can scour Twitter through searching the artist’s name and connect with fellow fans, or on the contrary, engage in arguments with those that may have less than favorable opinions on their favorite celebrity.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of affordances and with new platforms emerging there is a constant consideration of the ways social connections are mediated through networked technologies. For example, relatively recent platforms such as the video sharing app TikTok and the audio-only app Clubhouse have reminded us how important sound is in the participatory spaces created by networked publics. While TikTok seems to be outlasting Clubhouse in sustained engagement, both platforms showcase how we must go beyond the largely text-based and visual dynamics considered in platform infrastructures.

<Fig. 1.2 here> *TikTok’s celebration of Latinx creators during Latinx Heritage Month 2021.*

Platforms should be viewed as sites where publics gather to establish shared relationships. However, online social engagements are highly susceptible to commodification. The Internet is often framed as an unprecedented avenue through which communities who have been excluded from the mainstream public sphere can have a voice and be visible. However, the politics of visibility are constantly being commodified with the same tools that allow more people to produce media. The commercialization of participatory cultures in online space exists within a culture of Silicon Valley where the data being collected from users become part of a business model. Therefore, social media is more than just a space where visibility is at stake. Important questions to consider when analyzing platforms as sites of social connection include: What are the social behaviors that are being allowed to convene within the space, who is being excluded, and how are such interactions moderated? What are the material aspects that are required by the networked public? Finally, what forms of public meaning-making are occurring within networked publics? This last question is the focus of the following section.

### Meaning-Making and Digital Media

Approaching online infrastructures with a critical lens means accepting that they are not neutral terrains. Indeed, platform functionalities carry implicit assumptions about who and how an interface should be engaged with. Here, **interface** is used to describe any online functionality such as the affordances outlined previously, the layout of a webpage, how a website can be accessed, or any number of structural considerations. Embedded in this analysis of online structures is a consideration of power. Media studies scholar Mel Stanfill defines how power can be understood to operate when interacting with digital technologies. Power is both a possibility and a disallowance. Therefore, it is critical to pay attention to what technology does and does not allow. The power of possibility creates norms of engagement with various platforms. It assumes how users will engage with a site which discounts other possibilities. This assumption structures a user and how they should act rather than how the individual person might otherwise decide. Stanfill uses the lens of discourse to assess the productive power of online structures. The use of the term discourse here means how concepts are thought through and made sense of. In other words, it is the process through which we make meaning of things. Analyzing online interfaces as a discourse allows us to consider how dominant cultural ideas about user categories such as ethnoracial and gender identities, language, and other factors may contribute to a user’s sense of inclusion and exclusion within an online environment.

Going beyond the interface as a specific source of meaning-making, Black digital studies scholar André Brock outlines a methodological toolkit and conceptual framework he names critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA). CTDA is meant to combine analyses of the material technology and design (interface analysis), productions of meaning that are driven by certain technological uses, and users of technology within the space of analysis. Brock incorporates interface analysis with an analysis of discourse under the lens of critical race theory. However, the toolkit of analysis is meant to be malleable to any sort of critical and cultural theories, including but not limited to, feminist, queer, and/or Latinx studies. Finally, it is important to highlight that CTDA focuses on technological artifacts, practices, and beliefs in its analysis. Therefore, it not only considers what normative use of the technology is being suggested to users, but instead it “reorients technocultural practice to the cultural context in which the artifact is being used” (Brock 1016).

To illustrate an example of how this analysis can be used, we return to TikTok shortly after the 2020 US presidential election. Exit poll results following the election revealed that all US Latinx voters, subdivided by national origin leaned, with varying degrees, towards the Democratic nominee Joe Biden except for the Cuban electorate. This sparked discourse between Latinxs within online spaces about what it meant to be “Latina/o/x” and the identity politics of the ethnoracial group. On TikTok, many non-Cuban Latinxs used sounds and built-in augmented reality filters to creatively produce content which spoke to how they believe Latinxs should participate in US electoral politics. Using CTDA as a toolkit to analyze this scenario, TikTok as an artifact would require an examination of the services TikTok provides as well as its protocols. TikTok’s interface and how a user is constructed (discursive interface analysis) through a meaning-making process described above would approach the platform as a practice. Finally, the beliefs TikTok mediates would come from content generated by the Latinx users and the engagement of that content. For example, Latinx studies can be used in describing this meaning-making event with concepts such as horizontal hierarchies, defined by Frances Aparicio as “horizontal differences, conflicts, tensions, and affinities between and among Latina/os of diverse national identities” (31). Therefore, the beliefs discussed by TikTok users and the technological interface are accounted for in the analysis of the platform event.

### Latinx Visibility Online

Considering the various ways that networked publics convene through the relationships afforded by platform technologies outlined above, this section will detail examples of how US Latinxs have used digital media to engage in political discourse, online activism, and formation of communities of similar interest. Many scholars and activists alike have long realized the power that social media has in generating social movement organizing and discussions in online spaces.

One example of online organizing that quickly mobilized the potential of social media was that of undocumented Latinx activists in the mid- to late- 2000s.While many of these activists may or may not be or have been identifiable as DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) activists, they used the spreadable nature of social media to circulate their stories. Circulation of narratives in online space is an important tool which can allow for alternative stories to those being told through mainstream media outlets. With alternative narratives to the mainstream, undocumented activists have been able to tell their own stories by blogging, tweeting, or live streaming their content. Beyond offering direct access to circulate their stories, undocumented Latinx activists have ignited conversations around a sense of “ideal citizenship” by pointing out the respectability politics involved in DREAM activist narratives. This circulation of narratives and counternarratives demonstrates that the spreadability of stories can increase visibility. However, whether this visibility translates into greater access to resources requires further investigation.

Using social media to engage in political mobilization and discourse characterizes what is referred to as hashtag activism. Using Jackson et al.’s definition, **hashtag activism** is “the strategic ways counterpublic groups and their allies on Twitter employ this shortcut to make political contentions about identity politics that advocate for social change, identity redefinition, and political inclusion” (xxviii). From #blacklivesmatter to #metoo, various calls for social change have sought the communicative potential of social media as a space to spark conversation and action.

<Fig. 1.3 here> *Screenshot of a video promoting TikTok’s #familialatina, where users are encouraged to promote their Latinidad in celebration of a “Latinx community.”*

Much like the discussion in the first half of this chapter, hashtag activism is a networked activity, meaning not only is the discourse important to consider within such actions, but the relationships formed throughout have demonstrated a potential to move online activism between different media forms and onto the streets.

Another dimension of social movements that have become increasingly visible are the ins and outs of forming coalitions. Returning to the use of networked technology by undocumented activists, many of these activists have used the increased visibility of social networking sites to foreground the lived experiences of being queer and undocumented. Using the term “undocuqueer,” activists have engaged in coalitional politics by bridging LGBTQ+ and immigrant rights.

Not all political discourse in online space functions as a moment to build coalitions as just described. Indeed, online spaces such as Twitter or YouTube are far from ideal. In her important analysis of Latinx Twitter, Latinx media scholar Arcelia Gutiérrez examines how online visibility for issues that affect Latinxs often lead to internal fragmentations and anti-Blackness due to what she describes as the “homogenization and the flattening of difference” within Latinx Twitter (8). This characterization of Latinx Twitter allows us to understand how easily certain issues such as media representation are taken as a competition between Black and non-Black Latinx people, a sentiment that erases Black Latinxs from the imagined “Latinx” representation.

Online conversations of ethnoracial identity are ways people can speak back towards media industries. An illustrative example of this dynamic was visible with the 2021 release of the musical film *In the Heights* which was based on the stage musical of the same name. The stage version of the musical was co-created by Lin-Manuel Miranda who has become a household name due to the success of the Broadway musical *Hamilton*. *In the Heights* takes place in Washington Heights, a neighborhood in New York City known for its large Dominican population. Many Black Latinxs pointed out the lack of dark-skin cast members particularly in leading roles for a film that is supposed to take place in a neighborhood like Washington Heights. Discussions of colorism quickly turned into a response with the anti-Blackness described above. The sense that the increase in representation for dark-skin Black Latinxs comes at the loss for light skin Latinxs showcased the anti-Blackness present in Latinx Twitter discourse. Miranda himself soon issued an apology where he stresses his views on the importance of being seen. This example demonstrates the ways visibility has become not only an issue with who is on the screen, but the conversations that are sparked by the audience and the unprecedented access they and producers of media have with each other.

As alluded to above, visibility is not a neutral field. While social movements have benefited from the ability to mobilize the digital public sphere in a variety of contexts, issues such as content moderation, misinformation, censorship, shadowbanning, and others still, complicate the conversations on the politics of visibility in an often-unequal terrain.

Studying Latinx media in the digital age involves considering aspects of technology and culture in more ways than can conceivably fit in this chapter. From US Latinx influencers to disinformation campaigns that are culturally specific, this topic area requires a knowledge of scholarly work from Latinx, media, communication, information, and science and technology studies. As we move increasingly into a place where computer technology is used in every aspect of daily life, knowing how Latinxs are seen and see themselves as **data** becomes consequential. Data is socially constructed, and algorithmically-driven technological systems are popularly used to make decisions from standardized tests to predictive policing. Therefore, it is vital to understand how data-driven systems reproduce the systemic biases that have long disenfranchised marginalized people.

In this chapter, several tools for analyzing digital media and Latinx cultural productions online were outlined. Recognizing the ways digital technologies and the cultures who use them influence each other approaches a richer understanding of what a networked Latinidad looks like across online spaces. As more attention is paid to this topic and the deficit frame of the digital divide is not the area that dominates the conversation, the field of Latinx digital media studies will reflect the complex lives of US Latinxs.

*Javier Rivera is a PhD student in Communication at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. His research* *focuses on US Latinx media, ethnoracial performance, and the ways new media and technology shift our understanding of Latinidad.*

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