

Center for Race & Ethnicity

Beyond the Digital Divide: Race, Ethnicity and New Media

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“New media alters the interface with information from one of consumption to one of creation and participation.”
– James Katz

“Library digital archives have expanded public access beyond library doors and have yielded a quiet political force shaping public memory.” – Marija Dalbello

“Access to new media does not create a monoculture, but instead cultural practices shape new media usage and its role in a particular culture.” – Ulla Berg

“New media cannot erase our troubled racial history. We must keep our eyes open to how new media reify racial hierarchies.” – Meredith McGill

Selected Events—Center for Race & Ethnicity—191 College Ave

Lecture with Louis Masur (Trinity College) —The photograph That Shocked America

Friday
Feb 15

Roundtable – Race, Ethnicity, and the Subprime Mortgage Crisis

Friday
Mar 7

Interdisciplinary Conference—DNA, Race, and History

Fri-Sat
Apr 18-19

Film and Discussion—Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin

Thursday
Apr 24

Roundtable—Between Privilege and Poverty: Perspectives on NJ Disparities

Friday
April 25

A conversation on the rise of new media and new forms of personal communication: Are we cementing old inequalities or creating new ones?

Panelists: Ulla Berg, Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies; James Katz, Director, Center for Mobile Communication Studies, School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies; Meredith McGill, English/New Media Literacies Working Group Coordinator, Center for Cultural Analysis; Marija Dalbello, School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies.



As the panelists' varying perspectives illustrated, the context-specific use of new technology conditions the potential for social change.

NEW MEDIA AND DEMOCRATIZATION

“New media (e.g. cell phones and the internet) alter the interface with information from one of consumption to one of creation and participation.” – James Katz

Libraries have always served as collectors and shapers of memory. Collections in old media (e.g. books and photos) are located on site and often tied to particular institutions. As Marija Dalbello noted, based on her research of the first wave of digital collection development, “digital archives have expanded public access for collections, offering new ways of engagement with existing collections, in ways that can open collections to local communities, expanding the role for libraries and librarians to act as a quiet political force shaping public

memory.”

She offered examples of “living libraries” such as a digitization project initiated by the Idaho Museum of Natural History (now at the University of Virginia), when digitized images of Native Americans from early public archive projects prompted descendants to come forward and identify relatives and tribe members, historically locating the formerly exoticized and anonymous persons depicted in the photos. “New media in this case allows the subjects of history to participate in the interpretation of their own histories.” – Marija Dalbello

TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURAL CHANGE

Where digital libraries suggest the potential for new media as “a democratic interface,” Ulla Berg pointed out that new media must also be read as “embedded in social processes” and within pre-existing cultural and economic structures.

In her work, Berg explores

how Peruvian migrant communities use various forms of new media, such as cell phones and video letters, to communicate across national boundaries with family in their homeland. Responding to David Harvey’s reading of postmodernity as a moment of intense time-space compression, Berg notes, “Undocumented migrants cannot cross the border frequently; therefore, new media technologies allow people to maintain relationships across national boundaries and can potentially forge social cohesion across national boundaries, but can also create anxiety and social discrepancies.”

“Access to new media does not create a monoculture, but instead cultural practices shape new media usage and its role in a particular culture.” – Ulla Berg

In contrast to America, where widespread use of

landlines preceded cell phone usage, many non-western countries follow a different course. For example, James Katz pointed to research in Ghana that shows landline phones have increased .8 percent from 2001 to 2007, while in the same period cell phone use increased 29.8 percent.

In his presentation, Katz also described how new social formations are created around common interests with the use of network sites, such as MySpace or Facebook. Rather than based on race, ethnicity or social status, new virtual networks group around interests such as fantasy baseball or movie celebrities.

WHEN NEW TECHNOLOGY MEETS OLD IDEAS

New media may reinforce racial hierarchies and stereotypes. Citing Martin Kevorkian's *Color Monitors: The Black Face of Technology*, Meredith McGill argues that "The face of new media digitalizes the Black man and immobilizes him in front of the computer. "From Hollywood films to comic strips technology-adept black men free white men to engage in cyber phobia. Blacks are often seen as technological subservient helpmates to whites. New media cannot erase our troubled racial history. We must keep our eyes open to how new media reify racial hierarchies."

NEW MEDIA AND SHIFTING LIVES

New forms of communication aided by cell phone usage and video surveillance have changed familial expectations and the workplace.

"The traditional control over children has been extended due to cell phones. Cell phones now allow people to locate one another." – James Katz.

Ulla Berg noted that undocumented or immigrant nannies may be watched by surveillance cameras in American homes.

While he noted that technology is visibly changing "the nature of social interaction" James Katz raised the question of whether this change will lead to democratization, or allow the privileged access to an "affordable luxury." While programs such as Skype allow free access to international communication for immigrant communities, the question of access remained an issue for panelists.

"Surveillance cameras brings social pressure to report where you are/what you're doing which plays into labor relations, specifically in undocumented work." - Ulla Berg.



Rutgers University Center for Race and Ethnicity

Address: 191 College Avenue; (732) 932-2181; raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu. **Director:** Keith Wailoo, History/Institute for Health. **Associate Director:** Mia Bay, History.

Senior Program Coordinator: Mia Kissil

Graduate Assistants/Editors: Nadia Brown, Jeffrey Dowd, Melissa Stein, Anantha Sudhakar, Dora Vargha

- Facilitating research and enriching education on matters of race and ethnicity in contemporary life in America, in New Jersey, and the world
- Promoting collaborations and fostering cross-disciplinary seminars and discussions on topics from immigration and work, to ethnic politics and racial classification, from preservation of cultural identity to its transformation, and including questions of poverty, discrimination, advancement, integration, and privilege.
- Identifying critical areas for future research and supporting race and ethnicity research and policy development.

GENERAL INFORMATION about the Center for Race and Ethnicity and its activities.

<http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu>

Teaching Race and Ethnicity across Disciplines (syllabus exchange)

<http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu/TeachingRaceAndEthnicity.html>

Katrina conference and forthcoming volume

<http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu/KatrinaAuthorMeeting.html>

Other Roundtable Discussions

<http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu/TeachingUnimaginableExperiencesSummary.htm>