

# 5

## Critical Intercultural Communication and the Digital Environment

Thomas K. Nakayama

### 5.1 Critical Approaches to Intercultural Communication

Questions of power lie at the heart of the critical intercultural communication project, but the ways that power is deployed and its alignment with various identities is enormously complex and dynamic. Despite the rise of the digital environment, little attention has been paid to the ways that social media influence intercultural communication. In this chapter, I explore the ways that social inequality is reinforced in the digital environment, as well as the ways that people utilize social media to resist that inequality. More specifically, this chapter looks at the Twitter account of President Obama, the use of Twitter in the Black Lives Matter movement, the development of the Microsoft artificial intelligence bot, Tay, and the tweets that shaped her early development. Using a dialectical approach (Martin & Nakayama, 1999), this chapter highlights the ways that digital media's 'status-levelling' and other digital media concepts can reinforce and resist social inequality across cultures and cultural differences.

While there is no definitive history of critical intercultural communication, the development of this approach arose as a response to the social scientific or functionalist approach that dominated intercultural communication studies in the United States. The critical approach emphasizes understanding intercultural communication in the context of social relations, such as race, class, gender, sexuality and nationality, for which an understanding of the role of power in intercultural interactions and encounters is key.

Others have begun to write the history of the emergence of critical intercultural communication (Halualani, Mendoza & Drzewiecka, 2009). While there is no definitive history, the roots of the development can be traced to the late twentieth century in which critiques of many concepts

central to traditional intercultural communication emerged. Critiques of the notion of a unitary 'culture' began as early as 1992 (Altman & Nakayama, 1992) which challenged the assumption in functionalist research that culture could and should be conceived as simply a variable that explains differences in communication. The domination of the functionalist or social scientific approach throughout a large part of the history of intercultural communication meant that alternative approaches were sought to help explain and understand other ways of thinking about how cultures come into contact.

This work has continued into the twenty-first century. For example, critiques of static notions of culture began to be challenged by scholars who envisioned culture as a 'site of struggle' (Collier et al., 2001; Martin & Nakayama, 1999; Moon, 1996; Starosta & Chen, 2001). Others have critiqued notions of 'nation' and argued that nations should not be viewed as having a unified national culture (Altman & Nakayama, 1992; Ono, 2010). Scholars have also critiqued more traditional notions in intercultural communication, such as approaches to adaptation that do not sufficiently consider the impact of race, sexuality and gender (De la Garza & Ono, 2015).

Scholars in the critical tradition were interested in asking questions about the larger social and historical forces that shape intercultural interaction, particularly in the context of tensions between Israelis and Palestinians or Greeks and Turks. They also wanted to look at histories of colonialism to help understand the postcolonial condition, and it is probably fair to summarize that the rise of postcolonialism enhanced the critical study of intercultural communication.

Additionally, I would argue to consider the power relations between individuals, which might be linked to differences in status. For example, interaction might vary substantially if the communicators are tourists, business people or refugees. Unfortunately, most critical intercultural scholarship does at this stage not focus on the interpersonal level of interaction.

Critical scholars also explore media representations of cultural groups to understand the construction of particular stereotypes and the interests that are served by these images. Concerns about how newspapers write about various immigrant groups are not new, and that includes 'yellow journalism' and especially representations of the 'yellow peril'. Yet, concerns about media representations increased in the latter half of the twentieth century. In this context, I wrote an early piece (Nakayama, 1988) on the stereotype of Asian Americans as a 'model minority' in order to critique this portrayal and the ways that it served the interests of white America. Ono and Pham's book (2009) on Asian American images in the media draws on such criticism when it explores the impact of stereotypical portrayals on Asian American identities. Their analysis demonstrates the importance of

understanding the histories of Asian American cultural groups, as well as the role of stereotyping in media images, which serves different purposes at different times. While this research developed, other scholars were analysing media representations of many other cultural groups, including African Americans, Latinx, indigenous peoples, women and sexual minorities.

Critical scholars have also been very focused on understanding how the past has been constructed to serve different interests and the impact of those constructions on contemporary intercultural relations. For example, the master narrative of whiteness in the history of South Africa creates tensions with shifting racial relations in post-Apartheid era (Steyn, 2001; 2004). Under apartheid, the national narrative insisted that the white European settler arrived in South Africa at the same time as the black (Bantu-speaking) South Africans who came down from the north (Dean et al., 1983: 17). This narrative means that the black South Africans have no more legitimate claim to the land than the Dutch immigrants who rebranded themselves as 'Afrikaners' and their language as 'Afrikaans' in a move to claim their place. As whiteness needs to establish a new identity in this new post-Apartheid context, it has to grapple with a complex history of race relations, racism and Eurocentric ways of thinking.

One of the first textbooks in the United States to incorporate social scientific or functionalist approaches with qualitative or interpretative and critical approaches to intercultural communication was titled *Intercultural Communication in Contexts* (Martin & Nakayama, 1997). Since then, additional textbooks have appeared and some of them focus exclusively on the critical approach such as *Intercultural Communication: Globalization and Social Justice* by Kathryn Sorrells (2013). On the other hand, the eighth edition of Lustig and Koester's *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication Across Cultures* has been revised to include a more critical perspective when Halualani was brought in as co-author (2017). These changes in the teaching of intercultural communication point to a robust future for critical intercultural communication.

## 5.2 The Digital Environment and Intercultural Communication

The emergence of the digital environment has influenced intercultural communication, but the digital environment is, of course, not monolithic. There are many different platforms and ways of communicating from Facebook to Twitter and Instagram to Snapchat. Each of these platforms has its own characteristics and strengths and weaknesses. In an earlier analysis of the role of race on the Internet, Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White co-edited an important collection that highlighted the ways

that the Internet was changing and influencing racial relations (2012). Others have analysed how search engines compound racial attitudes (Noble, 2018) or the ways that race, sex and class are treated in the online environment (Noble & Tynes, 2016). In addition, I have examined the ways that whiteness has been shaped by the Internet (Nakayama, 2017). The online digital environment is not necessarily a place of liberation, but it does contain the power to resist domination. Let us attend to this aspect of the digital environment and intercultural relations by briefly discussing three aspects in particular: user-generated content, pseudo-anonymity and status-levelling.

User-generated content: across these various digital platforms, one of the unique characteristics vis-à-vis traditional mass media is the role of user-generated content. Awareness that the digital environment could be weaponized emerged as early as the claim that the then-president of the United States, Barak Obama, was not born in the United States. Since the Constitution of the United States requires that only 'natural-born citizens' are eligible for the presidency, proof to the contrary would have made him an illegitimate president. While proof was never provided, Donald Trump popularized and gained widespread notoriety for related rumours on the Internet (Applebaum, 2015; Ortiz, 2016). Claims that anyone could print out their own Kenyan birth certificate with a website to do so floated around (Bateman, 2009), and fake Kenyan birth certificates of Barak Obama were produced online (Bump, 2017). The user-generated content and struggle over the birth certificate, 'natural-born' citizenship and whiteness demonstrated the power of the digital environment in creating questions about the legitimacy of the Obama presidency (Nakayama, 2013), which ultimately also helped Donald Trump in his election campaign in 2016.

Even today, a significant number of US Americans believe that Obama was not born in the United States. In a poll conducted in December 2017, '51 percent of Republicans said they think former President Barack Obama was born in Kenya' (Glum, 2017). This movement that denies the legitimacy of the Obama presidency is called 'birtherism' and it maintains an important force in Republican politics.

Pseudo-anonymity: the power of user-generated content combined with the pseudo-anonymity of the Internet can be a very powerful force in creating tensions across cultural differences. An example of these two powerful aspects of social media was reflected in the initial release of Tay, an artificial intelligence bot from Microsoft that was programmed to learn through her interactions with people. When it was launched, Gibbs summarized it as follows: 'Tay is made in the image of a teenage girl and is designed to interact with millennials to improve its conversational skills through machine-learning' (Gibbs, 2016). However, interactions between the US American 'internet mob' and Tay led Ohlheiser to state: 'It took

mere hours for the Internet to transform Tay, the teenage AI bot who wants to chat with and learn from millennials, into Tay, the racist and genocidal AI bot who liked to reference Hitler' (Ohlheiser, 2016). In this case, the pseudo-anonymity, coupled with the mob of internet trolls, overwhelmed Tay and they were able to turn her into an incredibly racist (and anti-Semitic, homophobic, misogynistic) bot, which denied that the Holocaust happened. Microsoft apologized and took Tay down. When they tried to bring her back, Tay had another meltdown (Gibbs, 2016). Now, Tay is available only to registered users. As Microsoft notes on their Tay tweets page: 'Only confirmed followers have access to @TayandYou's Tweets and complete profile. Click the "Follow" button to send a follow request' (TayTweets, n.d.).

Since then, Tay has been replaced with Zo, which has been criticized for being too politically correct and not learning the nuances of how hate and bias function. Instead, certain words trigger her to avoid the topic: 'Zo won't be caught dead making the same mistakes as her sister. No politics, no Jews, no red-pill paranoia. Zo is politically correct to the worst possible extreme' (Stuart-Ulin, 2018).

For critical intercultural communication scholars, these artificial intelligence chatbots raise important questions about the use of social media to create more tension between cultural groups, and to create or enhance dominant groups on the basis of powerful fake news.

In addition, critical intercultural communication scholars may also want to understand why this happened to Tay but not to Microsoft's Chinese Xiaolce chatbot, which 'successfully interacts with more than 40 million people across Twitter, Line, Weibo and other sites' (Gibbs, 2016). While more research needs to be done to understand these cultural differences, perhaps the racial struggle in the United States is more salient to internet users and so they feel a stronger need to reassert their racial positionalities by interacting with these artificial intelligence bots in different ways.

Status-levelling: social media has made communication with people up and down various hierarchies much easier. This phenomenon means that ordinary people can communicate directly with the president of the United States. In May 2015, when President Obama posted his first tweet on a new Twitter account, he entered the digital environment with all of the implications of that move. His first tweet optimistically announced: 'Hello, Twitter! It's Barack. Really! Six years in, they're finally giving me my own account.' By now, experienced social media users should not be surprised that 'it took only a few minutes for Mr Obama's account to attract racist, hate-filled posts and replies' (Davis, 2015). In fact, it took just ten minutes from President Obama's initial tweet to draw the first racist tweet calling him the N-word and telling the president to 'get cancer' (Badash, 2015). From that tweet, many more racist and hateful messages would follow,

which included words like monkey, the N-word, anti-gay slurs and an image of President Obama in a noose. All these are tropes from an older era, but new is the ability of ordinary people to communicate directly with the president, especially in this hateful and ugly way.

President Trump is well known for his use of Twitter. Unlike President Obama, President Trump has weaponized his Twitter account, i.e. he has used it to campaign and communicate his policy ideas but has also used it to attack various cultural groups and nations. Many people have responded to a number of Trump's tweets and some have been blocked by him. In a recent lawsuit, the court ruled that it is unconstitutional for Trump to block people, as his Twitter feed is a public forum and people have the right to communicate their ideas (Herrman & Savage, 2018). Although it required a lawsuit and a favourable court ruling, the ability of ordinary people to communicate with the president and others has been maintained. This status-levelling is a feature of the digital environment that empowers more voices and views.

We see the characteristics of pseudo-anonymity, status-levelling and user-generated content playing out in many different examples. When Miss New York (Nina Davuluri) won the Miss America pageant to become Miss America 2014, she was the first American woman of Indian descent to do so. She also faced a torrent of tweets that reinforced older forms of racism to delegitimize her crown, some of which, claiming that she was not an American, harkened back to older forms of racism and racial laws such as the 1790 Naturalization Law that determined that one must be a 'free, white person' to be eligible for US citizenship. Although there are no longer any racial restrictions on US citizenship, many tweets claimed that she was ineligible to be Miss America. The Miss America pageant itself was originally limited to white women but that period has ended as well. Other tweets claimed that she was a terrorist and a Muslim, both of which are false claims. By redrawing boundaries around who is and who is not 'American', the tweets reinscribed older forms of racism and racist thinking, but the public arena of Twitter significantly increased the impact of these claims and allowed them to become very well known in American life (Cisneros & Nakayama, 2015).

Similar kinds of events can trigger a torrent of racist discourse into the public sphere. In 2012, when the Boston Bruins, a National Hockey League team, lost to the Washington Capitals in the play-offs, in the deciding Game 7, the winning score was made by Joel Ward, a black Capitals player. The public sphere was filled with 'a whole lot of vile stuff going on, in multiple platforms, on multiple sites' (Steinberg, 2012). The situation was very similar in 2014, also during the hockey play-offs, when the Boston Bruins lost Game 1 in double overtime to the Montreal Canadiens. This time the winning goal was scored by P. K. Subban, also a black player, and

Twitter lit up again with extremely racist tweets. Like the tweets in 2012, the 2014 tweets were so ugly and hateful that the *Boston Globe* included a link to see the tweets, but did not include the tweets (Fagerberg, 2014). In both cases, there is no definitive agreement on the number of tweets that were sent out, but there is evidence that the damage to the public image of Boston was substantial.

### 5.3 Digital Media and the Resistance to Domination

The digital environment also allows people to organize collective action to change contemporary cultural conditions, because social media tools are tools that empower people to organize resistance and social change. As critical intercultural communication scholars begin to explore the possibilities of the digital environment, many new ways of using social media for social change have become more evident.

In August 2014, Michael Brown, an African American male, was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St Louis. In the ensuing aftermath, activists utilized a wide range of tactics, including social media, to criticize the relationships between the police and African Americans. In this case, the hashtag #ferguson began trending and reporting what was happening. The early initiators, who were everyday citizens, began to build this network and connect to other stories of police shootings of African Americans. By tracking the development of this network and its features in a longitudinal way, we can understand how the activists were able to frame the relevant issues (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016). This is an example of the ways that social activists used social media to build networks and effectively reach large audiences to inform them about what was happening in Ferguson. However, it should also be noted that this was not a stand-alone strategy: activists also organized marches and more traditional forms of protest to pursue their goals.

The point here is that the digital environment also contains tools to resist the domination of certain groups and reject older ways of thinking about race, racial difference and racisms. The Internet and social media are tools that can be used for a wide range of goals. Unfortunately, the rise of digital media has led to a particularly substantial increase in the empowerment of hate groups and neo-nationalist racist discourses that challenge intercultural relations, and internet companies have been unable to do much about it (Rosen, 2018). This means that the digital environment at this stage is considerably more of a threat rather than a benefit to intercultural relations.

## 5.4 Outlook for Intercultural Communication in the Digital Environment

The Arab Spring first brought attention to the need to better understand intercultural communication in the digital age, because it highlighted the increasingly important role of social media in a society without open and free media (Khondker, 2011). Some scholars have analysed the way the network was built and information flowed from media sources, as well as particular types of individuals involved in the uprising (Lotan et al., 2011). Again, user-generated content, in this case through Twitter, played a significant role. However, since that time, we have come to see that the Arab Spring did not fulfil all of its promises, Twitter is not necessarily a revolutionary and liberating force, and the power of social media in countries with free and open media has been increasing as well.

Considering the need for more research in this new field, Robert Shuter has established the Center for New Media Intercultural Research as a global network of intercultural communication scholars working on issues related to intercultural communication and the digital environment. To date, the Center has built its network of 390 scholars from fifty-eight countries and their goals are to: (1) gather, generate and disseminate intercultural new media research; (2) apply intercultural new media research to organizational challenges in private and public sectors; (3) provide CINMR research associates with a searchable and interactive directory that enables them to identify and communicate with intercultural new media scholars world-wide (CINMR, n.d.).

Although much of the work that goes on under this larger umbrella network is not critical in its orientation and perspective, it is addressing the larger issues of the online environment and that may have tremendous implications for critical intercultural communication scholars as the digital environment grows and changes. No one can foresee what will happen in the future, much less in the digital environment, but we are all engaged in working towards a better future, and the ways in which the digital environment presents opportunities and challenges must be thought through and resisted if necessary. These are powerful tools that people can use in a wide range of ways for a wide variety of goals. The future will be built by all of us in the digital environment but the outcome is far from determined.

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