Attention-Compromising Practices and the Facilitation of White Ignorance

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The deleterious effects of constant and ubiquitous interaction with social media upon the minds of developing youths has steadily gained more attention of late. Perhaps ignited by the surprising political situation following the 2016 presidential election, perhaps for some other reasons, it seems that more theorists and commentators are willing to criticize social media than many were more than a decade ago, during the inception of the social media revolution. As evidence, witness the discussion of "Popcorn Brain," this new condition characterized by a decimated attention span of only a few dozens of seconds, and apparently precipitated by overuse of the dopamine hijacking algorithms and twitch-edited short form visual content of platforms like Tik Tok.[1]

The authors of the piece in question, *White Ignorance and Attention in the Age of Digital Technologies*, have approached this field of discussion from a different perspective.[2] While noting the harmful cognitive effects of social media and certain digital technologies—which they refer to as attention-compromising practices (ACPs)—the authors attempt to shift the focus of concern from the individual's cognitive performance to how impaired cognitive capacities in turn exacerbate and help perpetuate unjust social realities; chiefly racism, but others as well.

The argument applied is creative and relies heavily on the theories of Charles W. Mills, namely Mill's concept of "white ignorance," the social epistemology that shields Whites from directly analyzing the racial order and thus precludes the possibility that they might challenge it. White ignorance does not simply refer to a specific lack of this or that type or item of knowledge, but to the false beliefs and the absence of true beliefs about the real impacts of race on all people in society.

Mills argues that perception is not neutral but strongly affected by concepts, beliefs, prejudices, and biases that a person holds. This has been

supported by psychological research, with biases being shown to increase the likelihood of misperceptions. The authors of the paper in question want to link racism and digital technologies at a level prior to the perceptual moment. They argue that attention is logically prior to the three components of mind: the cognitive, affective, and conative (volitional or will). Psychological phenomena such as emotions, volitions, and perceptions can be influenced and distorted by white ignorance, but the rationale here is that, before this effect can happen, these phenomena must become the objects of a person's attention and thus become prioritized over other processes. Thus, before a person's perceptions or emotions can become distorted by white ignorance or the epistemology of white supremacy, those very perceptions and emotions must themselves be the objects of the attention of the person.

Here is where the attention-compromising nature of social media and digital technology begin to become important. If one's attention is somehow compromised, the discovery of the effect of white ignorance on one's psychology becomes less probable, and correspondingly, an individual is less likely to be able to attempt to redress the epistemology of white supremacy if these effects cannot become the objects of attention for a sufficient duration. Whether a person believes in a true or untrue proposition about the state of the world, the belief itself first requires attention.

The authors proceed to identify three ways in which ACPs produce and reproduce white ignorance; distortion, diversion, and distraction. Distortion occurs when ACPs direct users' attention online material that may generate the most internet traffic, but which may be of questionable epistemic value. Many times, this material is dis/misinformation. Diversion occurs when ACPs direct users to content that is "race neutral," in other words, material that does not directly address the racialized nature of society or ignores the racialized aspects of the subjects it portrays. Diversion happens at both the structural and content-specific levels. The former referring to the ways that platforms' proprietary algorithms filter out race-positive content, and the latter to the nature of the content on the platform. Distraction occurs when there is information overload. Content that would aid in challenging white ignorance might be present, but it

is located in a sea of diverse and distracting content, with no effective way to sort which content would be helpful to combating white ignorance.

In addition to these three modalities, the authors identify three "wrongs of ACPs." These wrongs are: the wrong of white ignorance, the wrong to knowledge producers, and the wrong to knowledge receivers. The first wrong is the wrong of ACPs not only producing white ignorance, but also, by means of the three modalities detailed above, stymieing attempts to curtail it. The wrong to knowledge producers refers to how the structure of ACPs prevents minoritized knowledge creators from receiving both equal attention and equal credibility from other users, especially when they produce knowledge relevant to race. The wrong to knowledge receivers refers to how, by allowing material of low epistemic quality to proliferate, ACPs limit the high quality and helpful information to which users have access. This wrong also encompasses the way that ACPs reinforce negative racial stereotypes, thus creating a situation in which minoritized people have even more trouble avoiding these stereotypes.

The authors conclude their piece by proposing that, while increasing efforts at media literacy education and awareness of the harmful effects of ACPs will be helpful, these strategies are unlikely to produce a big enough change. The authors instead suggest that efforts at education be directed at the point of origin of the technologies, the software developers who design and produce ACPs. They therefore advocate for ethics education for software designers, so that these designers can be made aware of the deleterious effects of ACPs and, it is hoped, design technologies that do not reproduce white ignorance. The authors make clear that this education should not be a standalone course, but should be integrated into the curriculum for software designers.

The argument laid out by the authors offers a valuable contribution to theorizing about the effects of dis/misinformation, digital technologies, and education. The shift in focus from "downstream" psychological processes and technological behaviors towards attention, a mental process that would allow challenges to white ignorance to happen in the first place, is an interesting and insightful stratagem. Individual acts of racism and racist institutional and social practices are formed, take place in, and are reproduced within a psychological

matrix which make them more likely to be reproduced that reversed at each cycle. Therefore, it stands to reason that challenges to the system of racism must themselves likewise aim to influence this psychological grounding.

While the authors cite psychological and philosophical research that defines the concepts they use in the piece, the work can benefit from more engagement with some of these concepts. For example, when differentiating attention from cognitive (mental), affective (emotional), and conative (volitional) processes, the authors make a distinction between a person's attention to these inner processes and the cognitive process/act of perception. The difference between these two processes can be stated in a little more detail. To perceive and to "attend to" seem to be near synonyms; if they are not, the reason they are not should be explained. Perhaps attention is the reflexive perception of one's own perception, or perhaps it is to perceive (something) for some duration. In either case, a short clarification of this would be helpful to refine the psychological aspects of their argument, and need not take up much space within the piece.

Much more central to their argument is the claim that ACPs produce and reproduce white ignorance in part by preventing people from paying attention to both their own psychological process and to information or content that could challenge white ignorance. The authors have not quite made the case that ACPs do this better or more than any other instrumentality produced by our society, and they have not demonstrated that this is a primary effect of ACPs, rather than just an accidental side effect produced by virtue of being used within an already racist system. Indeed, long before ACPs, "attention-enhancing practices"—reading, writing, studying, researching—produced these very same racist effects, and continue to do so. These more traditional practices might directly produce white ignorance by focusing the attention upon explicitly racist ideas and topics, but in a manner which approves of these. The traditional practices also are capable of producing white ignorance in the ways described by the authors, namely, by preventing people from engaging with material which more directly challenges and problematizes white ignorance and racism, although they cannot do this to the extreme degree of which modern distracting technology is capable.

Obviously, the authors think that ACPs make the work of redressing

the faults of these older practices more difficult, but the role of traditional practices in maintaining and reproducing white ignorance should be dealt with at least briefly, unless the authors be misunderstood as arguing that older practices are inherently less prone to reproducing white ignorance in the ways that they discuss in their paper. It may be the case that whatever technology a racist society produces will serve to reproduce white ignorance and racism, simply by virtue of being embedded within a racist system, however much it is designed to not do this. The authors might take up this possibility, and offer some arguments in the contrary.

The authors successfully describe how ACPs contribute to the maintenance of white ignorance, but their work might benefit from some description of what society would look like if ACPs were not used, or if they were used in ways that combat white ignorance. The article ends with the suggestion that software designers should be educated to create more socially responsible software. To accompany this recommendation, the authors should also include a brief description of some of the features of such socially responsible software. This is not to say that the authors should describe how such a society can be obtained, just that it might help to illustrate their arguments, by means of contrast, if they could offer a picture of a world in which these digital technologies were designed and behaved differently.

REFERENCES

1 Ayan Omar, "What is 'Popcorn Brain'? Social Media Could be Ruining Our Attention Span," *London Evening Standard*, 16 February 2024, https://www.standard.co.uk/news/tech/what-popcorn-brain-meaning-social-media-harm-attention-span-b1139651.html

2 A.C. Nikolaidis and Henry Lara-Steidel, "White Ignorance and Attention in the Age of Digital Technologies," *Philosophy of Education* 80, no. 2, https://doi.org/10.47927/80.2.131.