

Public Discourse, Community Concerns, and Civic Engagement: Exploring Black Social Networking Traditions on BlackPlanet.com

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This study explores community life on a black social network site, BlackPlanet, to see whether and how participants engage in public discussions; if these discussions center on issues considered to be critical to the black community; and if so, the extent to which participants' online networks are used to foster some level of civic engagement. Participation analysis, content analysis, and a thematic analysis were used to analyze public discussions on the site's community forums. The findings show that participants are deeply committed to ongoing discussions about black community issues. However, none of these discussions moved beyond a discursive level of civic engagement, suggesting that the potential for mobilization through social networking online has not yet been realized, despite the traditional orientation to community service among blacks in America.

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Introduction

Since the late 1980s, young black professionals have been meeting at First Fridays social events on the first Friday of each month in cities across the United States. Claiming to have a network of over 850,000 members, with events that attract between 300 and 3,000 attendees per city per month (First Fridays United, "About Us," n.d.), First Fridays is one of the best-known social networks for young black professionals. Although entertainment, and in some cases making business contacts, are its primary functions (First Fridays United, "About Us," n.d.), a major component of First Fridays is the attention paid to issues of concern to the black community. Making use of their email lists and websites, independent First Fridays organizers often solicit support for non-profit events and encourage members to use their resources (time or money) strategically to invest in community-based programs. Notifying members of events such as Hurricane Katrina fundraising, inner city school book donations, and voter registration drives are some of the recent activities organized by the various First Fridays groups (First Fridays United, "Events," n.d.).

This community service orientation is not surprising, given that civic engagement and social action are longstanding traditions for black social networks (Davis, 1996). The Jack and Jill Club, developed in the 1930s to provide networking opportunities for middle and upper middle class children; the nine black Greek lettered fraternities and sororities that comprise the National Pan-Hellenic Council founded in 1930; and The Links, a social club for African American women founded in 1946, among many others, were major contributors to efforts aimed at dismantling lynching and Jim Crow laws (Graham, 2000), as well as securing voting rights (Scott, 1990), educational parity (Partridge, 1974), and the other rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution (Rouse, 1984). While the context for racial justice in America has changed over the years, the commitment to community service by these social clubs and organizations has not. So established is this tradition that when newer groups like First Fridays develop their mission statements, an interest in contributing to the social lives of their members also tends to include the more traditional sense of doing meaningful community work.

I began this article with a discussion of First Fridays, because it helps to foreshadow my view that research on black social network sites (SNSs) must engage with a different historical trajectory. While computer-mediated communication (CMC) researchers typically discuss relevant findings from previous CMC research, I ground my study of black SNSs in the history of black social networks, due to the relative absence of serious—and culturally specific—online social network studies onto which this article can scaffold. I also do so to signal that my work is guided by an interest in the myriad possibilities CMC creates for civic engagement¹ and coalitional thinking across age, culture, gender, class, and geographic lines. Thus, my overarching interest is not the micro aspect of social networking on these sites—what I would describe as the quasi-private discourse taking place on members' personal pages—but rather, the production of public discourse, conversations about the “common good,”² such as those taking place on the sites' community forums.

Specifically, drawing on data from a larger study, this study explores whether and how participants on BlackPlanet.com—one of the largest and longest running black SNSs—use the site's discussion forums for civic engagement. Examples such as black women's use of the Internet to disseminate information about the 1997 Million Woman March (Everett, 2002) and the July 2006 protest led by a coalition of black gay bloggers (Byrne, in press) show that some segments of the black community are very much using CMC for civic purposes.

Studies by Burkhalter (1999), Kolko (2002), McPherson (2002), Nakamura (2002), and Pole (2007), among others, have helped to pave the way for critical, multidisciplinary explorations of race in cyberspace. However, research on black SNSs is noticeably absent from the published literature. To date, the most serious research on BlackPlanet is Adam Banks' (2005) analysis of how members use black orality for written communication. Although Banks' study was conducted before BlackPlanet added the features commonly found on SNSs today, his findings are

important because they show how participants can use these traditional communication patterns as markers of cultural and racial authenticity.

In light of the general absence of scholarship on black SNSs, the major contribution of this article is to begin a published, “on the record” conversation about this particular aspect of CMC, which is essential for ongoing theorizing about the future of black public life.

Literature Review

Scores of contemporary research studies continue to show the importance of black social networks to those who cultivate them and to the community at large. Studies suggest that networks play a pivotal role in the development of a healthy sense of racial identity, which psychologists argue is necessary to resist the pernicious effects of racism (Marcia, 1989). Early work by Uyeki (1960) and Isajiw (1974) also showed the relationship between social networks and a positive sense of identity. In likening a healthy cultural identity to a healthy psyche, Marcia (1989) suggests that without it an individual is unable to adapt easily in more diverse environments. Research by Edgecombe (2004) also underscores the centrality of a healthy sense of identity in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world.

Lee, Campbell, and Miller (1991) found that blacks are more likely to interact with one another and to develop neighborhood networks, committees, and associations than are whites. As the research of Lee et al. suggests, blacks deliberately network in this manner as a coping mechanism and as a means of providing each other with access to social resources that would otherwise be unavailable to them within society. Similarly, Herd and Grube’s (1996) study of black college students and binge drinking showed that students who networked within the black college community and participated in black social clubs were less likely to be heavy drinkers, which the researchers attributed to the positive effects of within-group networking on identity and self-esteem.

Herd and Grube’s (1996) findings are supported by numerous other studies that point to how black social organizations help black students cope with the racism, hostility, and alienation they may otherwise experience, particularly at majority white universities (Kimbrough, 2003). Although recent concern about hazing violence has led many campus administrators and educators to conclude that sororities and fraternities are a campus nuisance (Nuwer, 2001), Hutcheson and Kimbrough’s (1998) and McClure’s (2006) studies of black Greek fraternities found that membership in these particular organizations had a positive impact on black male identity and was associated with a high level of campus activity, a desire to develop leadership skills, higher matriculation rates, and general integration into the fabric of the university, both at historically black and traditionally white university campuses.

In addition to their psychological function, black social networks continue to be vital for ensuring the success of community-based initiatives. A survey of education

and health literature revealed a relationship between social networks and the adoption of new initiatives or long-term behavioral changes. Research by Kaplan and Alsup (1995) found that HIV education and prevention outcomes were much more effective in instances where information was disseminated through a black social network. Recognizing the importance of social networks to the diffusion of information, the American Public Health Association (APHA) launched SororsCaring in 2006 as an educational partnership with four sororities of the National Pan-Hellenic Council. Using a train-the-trainer model for diabetes awareness and prevention, the APHA reasoned that because these networks continue long after graduation from college, a program like SororsCaring would provide them with “direct access to large numbers of black women across the nation” (Johnson, 2006, p. 5).

Although research on black SNSs is noticeably absent from the published literature, there are several studies on black Internet usage that underscore the importance of community-specific content to black participation online. Miller, West, and Wasserman (2007) and Lorence, Park, and Fox (2006) show that African Americans are less likely than whites to use the Internet for information seeking. However, Wilson et al. (2006), Harris (2005), and Detfelson (2004) argue that usage and participation depends on the availability of race- and/or community-centered content. For example, Wilson et al. (2006) found that without health information specifically targeted to African American Internet users, companies had difficulty recruiting African American participants to their clinical trials. Harris (2005) shows how commercial search engines may hinder African American participation, because they do not adequately direct users to black websites and provide minimal retrieval of relevant race-specific information. Similarly, Detlefsen (2004) concludes that African American participation increases when sites include interactive and multimedia features that feature famous blacks and community leaders.

Brady (2005) cites a survey conducted by a Chicago-based black women’s Web community called NiaOnline.com that found that black women use the Internet just as often as white women; however, black women typically used it to locate and purchase culturally-specific items. Similarly, Appiah’s (2003) study of black and white Internet usage found that blacks tend to spend more time on black-targeted sites and are able to recall more of the information from such sites than from mainstream sites. In a study of African American and white students in two online classes, Rovai and Gallien (2005) found that African American students recreated their raced community. Interestingly, this had a positive impact on students’ participation.

In a study of the Internet’s effect on African American political participation, Lekhi (2000) found that the major political parties provided relatively little information specifically for African American constituents. At the time of his study, only the Democratic National Committee developed African American specific content for its website. The DNC provided a newsletter, outreach program, and position papers on issues such as Affirmative Action and poverty reduction. Although the websites of civil rights organizations such as the NAACP provided readers with

community-specific information, they provided limited resources for facilitating dialogue among online users. At the time of Lekhi's study, The National Urban League was the only major civil rights group to feature an interactive forum on its site. Members could create topics for discussion with other members and with community leaders. However, by the time of the present study, the NUL did not have any discussion forums or other networking features functioning on its site. Following Lekhi's lead, I searched the official websites of longstanding social clubs and organizations such as the Links (linksinc.org), First Fridays United (firstfriday-sunited.com), and the Jack and Jill Club (jack-and-jill.org). Interestingly, none of these sites provided members with opportunities to network online, either.

In spite of the general absence of online networking opportunities for blacks on the aforementioned sites, black online communities have been thriving since the late 1980s. Eglash and Bleecker (2001) cite popular community sites such as The Drum (launched in 1988), Melanet (launched in 1989), and NetNoir (launched in 1995) as evidence of the ongoing presence of a black online public sphere. Eglash and Bleecker (2001) argue that black web networks such as these are promising because they attract large numbers of users, focus on African American cultural politics, and utilize information technology as a means of strengthening ties within the black community.

This brief overview contextualizes the multiple functions of black social networks and illustrates the extent to which community-specific interests influence black participation online and offline. From their inception to the present, black social clubs and organizations have promoted networking as a means to strengthen black identity, providing forums for civic engagement and for facilitating social action. Thus, when it comes to exploring the importance of online social networking and the development of SNSs, specifically, to the black community, a fundamental question is whether such online networking will be used to further the types of activities noted above.

To address this question, this study explores black community life on a black SNS, BlackPlanet, to see whether and how participants engage in public discussions, if these discussions center on issues considered to be critical to the black community, and if so, the extent to which participants' online networks are used to foster some level of civic engagement.

The Case Study

BlackPlanet was chosen as a case study because few other black SNSs have a substantial enough population size and range of communal spaces for addressing the question of civic engagement. As one of the largest and longest running black SNSs, BlackPlanet attracts a wide range of participants from varying age groups and geographic locations. In January 2007, the membership log on BlackPlanet's homepage boasted 15.8 million registered users since its inception in 1999. As a relatively long-running diasporic site, BlackPlanet is an established pillar in the black online

community. At some time or another, black web users in search of their raced community will encounter BlackPlanet.

It should be noted that although African American technology analyst Omar Wasow is credited as its co-founder and has long been its public face, BlackPlanet is not black owned. Its parent company, Community Connect, Inc.'s niche is culturally dedicated sites. Under the direction of founder and CEO Ben Sun, Community Connect, Inc. also maintains the Asian-American targeted site AsianAvenue.com, the English language Latino targeted site MiGente.com, and the recently-created lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender targeted site GLEE.com.

Although Community Connect, Inc. does not release any official statistics about users, changes to platform design, special features, and advertisers over the years suggest that their interest is in appealing to a primarily 16–24 year old base (Byrne, *in press*). BlackPlanet offers members user-driven community areas such as discussion forums on topics ranging from entertainment to race-related issues, community-specific news articles and response sections, chat rooms, and subscription groups. With the largest share of the e-commerce pie among ethnic social networking companies, CCI was expected to net about \$20 million in revenues across all three sites in 2006, of which 15% would come from its dating services, 50% from advertising, and 35% from job notices (Gangemi, 2006).

BlackPlanet was once considered to be a community site. Boyd (2008) notes that features such as public profiles, public traversable friends' lists, and public guestbook conversations or testimonials typically define SNSs and distinguish them from community sites. Although some aspects of these features were present when BlackPlanet was initially launched, each of them has been enhanced and emphasized in recent years. Participants are regularly asked to add to or update their profiles, emailed about inviting other friends, and encouraged to develop friendship networks or use the site's dating services.

As is standard on the CCI sites, in order to gain access to all of the features offered, BlackPlanet requires that members register by providing information on their sex, age, level of education, and various racial or ethnic characteristics (whether users enter them accurately is debatable). Interestingly, the identity and ethnicity categories on the registration form were modified when the site was redesigned in 2006. From about 2000 to 2005, BlackPlanet members only had five choices available to account for their racial identities: Black, Asian, Latino, Native American, and White. In 2006, members received more options, and if none were appropriate, they could choose 'other' or type in a specific term or ethnicity. Commenting on click box identities, media scholar Lisa Nakamura (2002) argues that the process of choosing identities in this way forces users into dominant notions of race. Changes to such categories might be indicative of an interest on the part of the site owners in appealing to a broader audience or a recognition of intra-racial and intercultural diversity on the site.

Unlike on community sites, complete anonymity on profile-driven SNSs is more difficult to maintain and tends to go against the sites' format conventions. Whereas

on community sites a member needs only fill out basic demographic information and create a unique username, on profile-driven SNSs such as BlackPlanet, participants tend to present rather accurate, personal portraits, even if their “real” names are not used. For example, of the members whose postings were analyzed for this study,³ each of their personal profiles included names of siblings, friends, photographs of significant others, and school and work details.

Methodology

In order to explore public life on BlackPlanet and the extent to which participation in this online social network site fosters civic engagement, it was necessary to generate a sizeable yet manageable pool of data. I limited my sample to community forum threaded discussions, because more members contributed to this area on a daily basis than to all of the other communal areas on the site. I used a multi-step, multi-method design that included calculating the participation rate in the discussion forums, a simplified content analysis, and a thematic analysis. This three-step procedure enabled me to identify the most popular forums, the prevalence of discussions around black community concerns, the relationship between race-specific threads and member participation, and the relationship between discussing common concerns and civic engagement. Table 1 summarizes the basic research structure, along with the methods and research questions associated with each step in the study:

Although I have been studying BlackPlanet for several years, this particular study was conducted over a six-month period, from September 2006 to February 2007. However, BlackPlanet forums are archived as far back as February 2006, and the data used are not limited to threads initiated during the time period of this study. In some instances, threads continued to receive responses even though they may have started months prior to the study period; those earlier portions of the threads were also included in the study.

Table 1 Multi-step, multi-method process designed to examine public discussions and civic engagement on BlackPlanet

Step	Methods	Research Questions
I	Calculation of participation rate (Discussion forums)	RQ1: What are the most popular forums on BlackPlanet?
	Calculation of participation rate (Discussion thread title sampling)	RQ2: Is there a relationship between forum popularity and race?
II	Content analysis (Keyword search of discussion forums)	RQ3: Are participants discussing issues of common concern to the community?
III	Content analysis (Hurricane Katrina and Darfur threads)	RQ4: Is there a relationship between common concern and civic engagement?
	Thematic analysis	

Analytical Procedures

Step 1

There are 18 discussion forums on BlackPlanet: Automobiles, Campus Life, Current Events, Family & Home, Finance, Food, Health & Beauty, Heritage & Identity, Movies & TV, Men, Music, Relationships, Religion & Spirituality, Site Feedback, Sports & Fitness, Style, Technology, and Women. To assess which forums were the most popular, I compared the number of discussion threads⁴ with the number of responses. Since the forums are cached as far back as February 2006, this measure could be calculated in a straightforward way. I did not calculate the rate of participation during the study, because BlackPlanet added a new forum after the study commenced, and threads are often deleted or moved by moderators due to inappropriate content. Because of the volume of threads and responses, it is unclear whether the tallies for each forum reflect only the number of posts available for one to read or whether the tallies reflect the actual number of posts submitted to the forum. Nevertheless, the calculations provided are useful in generally identifying where activity, and thus the center of public life, is likely to be.

In order to explore whether the “race specificity” of the thread topic had any impact on the popularity of certain threads or forums, I collected the thread titles from the 20 most active discussions within the most popular subcategories of the most popular and least popular forums. I examined only the most popular subcategories within these forums, because each forum has a varying number of subcategories. For example, there are five subcategories within the Heritage & Identity forum, whereas the Religion & Spirituality forum only has one subcategory. I collected the 20 most active discussion thread titles on the first and last Saturday of each month for four months (November to February; $n = 1600$).

Each discussion thread title was then coded as “race-specific” or “race-neutral.” I defined a race-specific thread as one in which the topic is clearly focused on a particular racial group. For example, “Are we lagging behind in academic achievement?” or “Are blacks lagging behind in academic achievement?” would both be coded as race-specific, even though in the first instance racial specificity is implicit with the use of “we.” I defined a race-neutral thread as one in which the topic did not explicitly or implicitly invite participants to address race. “How important has higher education been to your career?” or “How do you heal from infidelity?” would both be coded as race-neutral. In cases where a famous black figure was noted in the title, I also coded the thread in terms of whether it also explicitly or implicitly invited participants to discuss race. For example, a thread with the title “Oprah’s new house” was coded as race-neutral, while “Sistas! What does Oprah Winfrey’s success mean to us?” was coded as race-specific. Volume of and participation in race-specific and race-neutral threads were then calculated and compared.

Step 2

In order to assess whether participants discuss issues of common concern to the black community, I conducted a keyword search based on a list of issues extracted

from noted journalist and commentator Tavis Smiley's (2006) *The Covenant with Black America*. *The Covenant with Black America* is a collection of essays on 10 issues that Smiley and key black leaders and thinkers such as Marc Morial, President and CEO of the National Urban League, and David Satcher, former U.S. Surgeon General have identified as being of central importance to the black community. The issues are: healthcare and wellbeing, education, criminal justice, police accountability, affordable neighborhoods, voting, rural development, economic prosperity, environmental justice, and the digital divide. *The Covenant with Black America* has been at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, a first for a non-fiction book published by a black-owned press (Wheeler, 2006). In addition, Smiley and other community leaders host "State of the Black Union" forums and have called on grassroots organizations to use their networks at the local level. Similar forums have taken place in countless cities across the country.

Using the 10 issues identified in *The Covenant with Black America* as a framework for determining issues of common concern, I developed a list of 31 keywords that were then used to search the forums. It should be noted that the keywords were generated using three to five descriptive terms found in the opening paragraph of each of the *Covenant's* chapters; thus, this list was not exhaustive. The keyword search of all of the forums was used as a means of establishing, empirically, whether public life on BlackPlanet involved these larger community issues. The keyword search returned a list of all threads in which one or more of the keywords appeared. BlackPlanet's search engine provides results based on the appearance of a keyword in the discussion thread title or in the body of the initiating message.

Step 3

Given the large amount of data generated in steps 1 and 2, a smaller sample was extracted for the thematic analysis. The purpose of the thematic analysis was to explore the relationship between public discourse about community issues and civic engagement, specifically whether participants were pooling resources and forging alliances to address issues that were of contemporary/immediate concern. When I began this study in September 2006, the two major issues on center stage in the black community, and in the U.S. at large, were the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and the genocide in Darfur. Conversations in black and mainstream media repeatedly covered these topics; Spike Lee's HBO documentary *When the Levees Broke* (2006) had aired just days before on August 29th; organized protests about relief efforts in the Sudan were ongoing; and the United Nations Security Council recently approved a resolution to send a coalition of peacekeeping troops to further relief efforts.

Given this context, I explored forum activity around Hurricane Katrina and the genocide in Darfur and found that threads on these topics were among the most active in three of the five most popular forums. I subsequently monitored activity in all Hurricane Katrina and genocide in Darfur threads for the duration of the study. I collected all thread titles and responses, read them carefully and noted participants'

views on community action, whether any encouraged taking action, if alliances were developing or had already taken place, and the extent to which participants treated the online network as a resource for bringing about some form of change.

My search for “Hurricane Katrina” (or “Louisiana” or “levee”) or “Darfur” (or “genocide” or “Sudan”) yielded 466 threads in total. Threads in which the only responses were advertisements or chronicled an individual experience (e.g., a Hurricane Katrina survival story) were not used. I also eliminated threads with fewer than two unique participant screen names and any in which the conversation did not address either Hurricane Katrina or Darfur, even if this appeared to be the focus in the thread title or initial description.⁵ For example, the thread “Levees in New Orleans Sabotaged” initiated by whiteKKKman⁶ began with “God hates lazy people, so He breached the dikes to punish the lazy people of New Orleans...only the people too lazy to leave would still be in New Orleans.” Although there were 54 responses, making this by far the most popular of the Hurricane Katrina threads initiated in October, I eliminated it from the sample, because all subsequent responses focused on white-KKKman’s racist attitudes, rather than on anything connected to Hurricane Katrina.

After following the procedure described above, I was left with 43 topic threads. The Hurricane Katrina sample included 23 threads and 460 responses, while the Darfur sample yielded 20 threads and 280 responses. Since some participants became inactive users during the time when the sample was collected (a screen name is replaced with the generic “inactive user” when a profile has been deleted from the site), it is unclear exactly how many “inactive users” participated and what their contributions were to these discussions. Excluding the inactive users, there were 42 unique screen names in the Hurricane Katrina sample and 35 unique screen names in the genocide in Darfur sample. The length of postings varied; the longest response by a participant was 1,217 words in length, while the shortest was four words in length.

I drew on Ehrlich’s (2000) definition of civic engagement as my framework for coding. Ehrlich conceives of civic engagement as:

working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. (p. vi)

Delli Carpini’s (n.d.) definition of civic engagement was also useful for developing a list of codes to explore the Hurricane Katrina and Darfur threads. Delli Carpini explains that civic engagement can include a range of actions such as:

individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy. Civic Engagement encompasses a range of activities such as working in a soup kitchen, serving on a neighborhood association, writing a letter to an elected official, or voting. (p. 1)

Among the 12 codes used for the analysis were: volunteerism, committee membership and service, electoral participation, advocacy, activism, and community involvement. Advocacy was perhaps the broadest code, because it ranged from urging forum participants to take a particular course of action to an informational thread about events or activities. For example, "let's meet next Thursday to protest for Darfur" would be considered as reflective of civic engagement. Similarly, a post that asked participants to write letters to their Congressional representatives and included a sample letter and list of official addresses would be considered as reflective of civic engagement. In all cases, I was searching for some indication that participants were moving toward some course of action to address their common concern. I applied the codes systematically to the sample to produce counts of the frequency of each code. Another CMC researcher also read and coded the sample based on the aforementioned codes for civic engagement. The results differed on our interpretation of "taking action." The other coder counted all instances where "taking action" was discussed specifically and generally. I only counted instances where participants discussed a specific strategy. To address this difference, I modified my coding to include any suggestions to "take action," whether they were specific plans or abstract discussions about what ought to be in the plan. I also noted any indications as to whether discussions about community involvement included cooperation or the combining of resources from the online social network.

Findings

The first research question asked what were the most popular forums on BlackPlanet. At the conclusion of this study, there were 45,692 discussion threads and 367,017 responses across the 18 BlackPlanet forums. The most popular forums were Relationships, Heritage & Identity, Current Events, Religion & Spirituality, and Women. As the composite image of threads and responses below shows, Relationships accounts for 55% of threads, Heritage & Identity accounts for 9% of threads, Religion and Spirituality for 6.6% of threads, Current Events accounts for 4.2% of threads, and Women accounts for 3% of threads. Relationships accounts for 66% of responses, Heritage & Identity accounts for 12.2% of responses, Religion & Spirituality accounts for 8% of responses, Current Events accounts for 4.4% of responses, and Women accounts for 2.7% of responses.

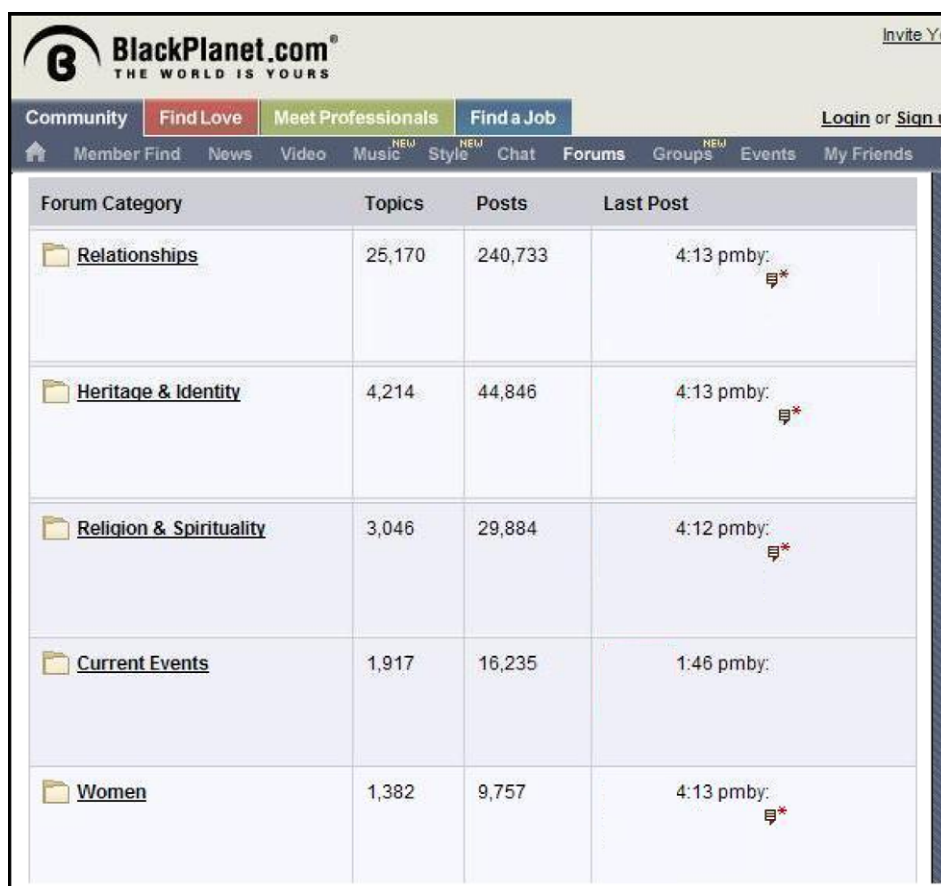
These five forums represent 77.8% of all forum threads and 93.3% of all forum responses. Thus, for any BlackPlanet member wishing to participate actively in the community at large, these five forums would likely figure prominently in their day-to-day public activities.

The second research question asked whether there is a relationship between forum popularity and race-related topics. As Table 2 shows, while race-specific threads ($n = 267$) only accounted for 33% of the top threads in the most popular forums, race-specific content accounted for 48% ($n = 14,090$) of the total responses in the sample.

In the most popular forums, each race-specific thread attracted 52.8 responses, on average, while each race-neutral thread attracted only 29.1 responses. More race-specific threads and responses occurred in the Heritage & Identity forum than in any other. On average, each thread in the Heritage & Identity forum had approximately 72.2 responses, while race-neutral threads had 43.3 responses. Even in Religion & Spirituality, where the volume of race-neutral threads and responses significantly outweighed the race-specific threads, each race-specific thread yielded 26.7 responses, while the race-neutral threads yielded about 38.3 responses per thread.

In the least popular forums, race-specific threads account for about 12% (n = 92) of all threads and about 13% of responses, as Table 3 shows.

Closer examination of the results indicates that there is a relationship between a race-specific thread and a higher response rate in the least popular threads, as well. On average, race-specific forums generated more responses per thread than












Forum Category	Topics	Posts	Last Post
 Relationships	25,170	240,733	4:13 pmby:  *
 Heritage & Identity	4,214	44,846	4:13 pmby:  *
 Religion & Spirituality	3,046	29,884	4:12 pmby:  *
 Current Events	1,917	16,235	1:46 pmby:
 Women	1,382	9,757	4:13 pmby:  *

Figure 1 Composite image of the most popular forums on BlackPlanet as of February 2007
Note: The screen names of the most recent posters were removed from the image.

Table 2 A comparison of race-specific and race-neutral threads and response activity in the most popular threads

Forum Title	Most Popular Forums					
	Race Specific Discussions			Race Neutral Discussions		
	Threads	Responses	Ratio	Threads	Responses	Ratio
Heritage & Identity (General)	89	6,427	72.2	70	3,031	43.3
Current Events (General)	76	5,271	69.4	84	625	7.3
Women (General)	55	1,251	22.7	102	3,321	32.6
Relationships (General)	28	634	22.6	132	2,959	22.4
Religion & Spirituality (General)	16	407	26.7	145	5,557	38.3
Totals	267	14,090	52.8	533	15,493	29.1

race-neutral threads, even though there were 616 more race-neutral threads across the least popular forums. These results suggest that race-specific threads still draw more responses and interest, and that the absence of race-specific discussions in these forums may be related to the lower overall participation rate by the membership.

The third research question asked whether participants were discussing issues of common concern to the community. As Table 5 shows, the keywords education (n = 1,332), slavery (n = 805), racism (n = 666), AIDS (n = 654), voting (n = 633), and justice (n = 593) were found in the largest numbers of discussion threads. The 31 keywords were found in 9,258 discussion threads in total.

Because of the number of these threads, it was impossible at this stage of the study to calculate the total number of responses each thread received, since this would mean sifting through all 805 thread titles from the “slavery” keyword search, for example, to see the number of responses within each thread. Thus, this keyword search only shows that participants do create forum topics around these issues; this alone does not reveal the nature of the discussions. Nonetheless, the fact that these

Table 3 A comparison of race-specific and race-neutral threads and response activity in the least popular threads

Forum Title	Least Popular Forums					
	Race Specific Discussions			Race Neutral Discussions		
	Threads	Responses	Ratio	Threads	Responses	Ratio
Style (Talk to Ford Models)	20	412	20.6	140	1,784	12.7
Automobiles (Customizing)	12	180	15.0	148	948	6.4
Food	20	88	4.4	140	1,604	11.5
Campus Life (General)	40	72	1.8	120	128	1.1
Technology (Video Games)	0	0	NA	160	616	3.9
Totals	92	752	8.2	708	5,080	7.2

Table 4 Keyword search for threaded discussions on issues of common concern

Common Concern Keyword Search	
Keyword	No. of Threads
Activism	33
AIDS	654
Affirmative Action	98
Barack Obama	90
Black Power	103
Boycott	6
Building Wealth	17
Civil Rights	385
Cops	336
Community Empowerment	3
Crime	841
Diabetes	80
Digital Divide	2
Education	1332
Economic Empowerment	17
Grassroots	19
Healthcare	101
Incarceration	72
Justice	593
Leadership	279
Police Brutality	47
Poverty	500
Protest	152
Prison	649
Racism	666
Reparations	115
Slavery	805
Solidarity	74
Unity	320
Voting	633
Voting Rights	236

31 keywords identified a total of 9,258 threads indicates that community issues are a prominent feature of black public life on BlackPlanet.

The fourth research question asked whether there was a relationship between discussion on issues of contemporary/immediate concern and civic engagement. Three significant patterns emerged from these discussions: 1) participants discuss “taking action” on an ideological or theoretical level, rather than in terms of specific courses of action appropriate for immediately addressing the issue at hand; 2) when specific courses of action are proposed, the initiators are often dismissed or called “irrational;” and 3) although participants acknowledge the “power of numbers,”

none explores the power of the numbers or resources available within the online social network. In the remainder of this section, I explain each of these findings, providing examples to highlight their most prominent characteristics.

Only three discussions were initiated with a request for specific forms of action. These particular threads also had the lowest participation (7 unique screen names in “Boycott anyone,” 6 unique screen names in “Calling Black America,” and 6 unique screen names in “Darfur—What can we do to stop the genocide”). It was more common for the person creating the topic to ask participants to reflect on the issue at hand, for example, “What can we do as a people” (33 unique screen names), than to suggest organized action. Thirty-nine of the discussions threads followed this “reflection” style; there were 583 messages and 120 unique screen names in these 39 discussion threads. When organized action was suggested, more than half of the respondents (58% or 70 unique screen names) engaged with the possibilities, 30% dismissed the notion outright, and the remaining 12% did not engage at all, but rather extended pleasantries like “good idea [screen name] good idea” or “let me think on this.”

The most common precursor to organized action came in the form of a question, usually, “Where do we go from here?” It was rare for participants to enter the discussion with a preset, detailed plan. The following statement by MsRead in a Hurricane Katrina thread illustrates this point (spelling, grammar, and typography are left as in the original):

MsRead

Female, 31, Little Rock, AR

[CruzIan], well said once again. what do we do now? They screwed us, as they have since we got here. Things will have to start at the smallest levels and gradually grow over time. We have to invest in our families, education, health, business, and communités. I am a strong proponent in all black prosperous communities. Lets get black doctors in black towns, black mayors governing black towns, black business owners in black areas. THAT IS WHAT WE HAVE TO DO TO GROW AS A PEOPLE AND ENSURE OUR KIDS KIDS HAVE SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO!

Of the instances where specific courses of action were proposed—candlelight vigils and “civil disobedience” once a week, a six-month boycott of “Pepsi, Coke, and pork,” and letters to state Senators urging them to help save Darfur—only the letters to State Senators idea was not immediately dismissed. The other two posters were labeled “irrational,” “unrealistic,” or their plans “made no sense.” However, none of their critics presented alternative courses of action. Similarly, the poster who described the letter writing campaign and went so far as to post two sample letters was simply acknowledged with “thanks,” “you’re the best,” and “great idea, good luck.” Participation in the thread ended shortly thereafter.

Instead of exploring the letter writing option, two participants in this same thread expressed their sense of hopelessness, even though a possible course of action had already been suggested:

SuperStar
Female, 26, Washington, DC

I have read some... Its just really sad and I feel helpless... Im not in a postion to really help with anything...

TechGurl
Female, Private [User's age was not made public], Chicago, IL

I know... I hate that feeling....

You know that it's unfair.... but you can't really make a big difference...

Participants in the more ideological threads frequently noted that “times have changed” since the Civil Rights Movement, the community is no longer “as one,” and civic organizations are no longer fulfilling their role:

Sahara
Female, Private, Houston, TX

Furthermore, I think that organizations like the NAACP need to change their name—no one has heard a peep from them on any of this since it happened. Where is the so-called ‘advancement’?...Groups like the NAACP used to stand for something and lead the way on issues such as this—now they fall for everything and are meaningless.

We have no activism or strength in numbers anymore.

Although members critiqued longstanding associations like the NAACP, they recognized the significance of such organizations. However, no participants indicated whether they were involved in any traditional black social networks, black associations, committees, or working in any other capacity to address the issues they spoke about.

In a similar vein, participants did not express any interest in cultivating their online networks. In the extended exchange below, not one of the participants explores the possibilities of incorporating the online network into the quest for “numbers:”

BlakkPanther
Male, 32, Denver, CO

“Well we have to start somewhere. We can start by simply putting our resources together.

I don't mean just networking, but imagine this.

10,000 black men coming together, Who make at least 30,000 per year. starting businesses, franchises under one large organization and keeping their current jobs. Each individual would make a little money, but the company as a whole should be in the high millions, possibly billions. There's power in numbers.

That would be a start.
That's just a thought."

MrEbb

Male, 55, San Francisco, CA

I also believe pooling resources will be a must. But we should start with a grassroots movement.

I think once you get passed a certain financial strata you find people are satisfied with the status quo. That's the place where you find Black Republicans! that's why I think we need to start with education. Making people aware how bad is the situation.

MrEbb

Male, 55, San Francisco, CA

We don't have to "reinvent the wheel". We can use the various examples of movements and investigate their failures.

I give Marcus Garvey's movement as an example.

The success of that movement was the unification of a large portion of Black people.

That unification began with education and building trust.

CrystalSunshine

Female, 28, Beverly Hills, CA

That would be a great start.

I'm down for this movement for sure.

Let me know when it starts.

Aside from the fact that this discussion is removed from the initial question, "how can we continue to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina," it is notable that the participants do not explore their online contacts as community resources. In fact, BlakkPanther explicitly indicates that networking is not part of his vision of a solution. Similarly, when BlackVoiceinDC suggests in another thread that "we" need to show solidarity with the people in Darfur, she consistently speaks about blacks "everywhere" but never directly solicits the assistance of the participants in the discussion, nor do any of them offer to play a role. Even though JDinChiTown expresses sympathy for "the cause" and notes that reading BlackVoiceinDC's post three days earlier inspired her to attend a meeting, neither one expresses an interest in collaborating.

After closely reading all 43 threads in the sample, I found that while participants are deeply interested in the well-being of Hurricane Katrina victims and the genocide in Darfur, civic engagement is not moving beyond the discursive commitment (the initial call for action, e.g., "we must do something to help"). In the rare instances when specific courses of action are proposed, the initiators are summarily dismissed, called "irrational," or placated with polite acknowledgments. Most interestingly, the

analysis reveals no instances where participants explored the possibility of working together on the issues they all recognized as being of great concern to themselves and to black people everywhere.

Discussion

While it was clear that participants are deeply committed to ongoing discussions about black community issues, these discussions did not move beyond a discursive level of civic engagement. As the findings show, much of public life on BlackPlanet centers on daily discussions of larger community concerns, yet meaningful action beyond the discussions has yet to emerge. Although the purpose of this study was not to assess the efficacy of black SNSs for collective action, it does suggest that collective action will not be the inevitable outcome of ongoing interaction in such environments, in spite of the black community's longstanding history of promoting social networking for this purpose.

Diani's (2000) study of online social movements underscores the difficulty of using computer-mediated communication technologies for this form of organizing. After investigating three types of political organizations, Diani concluded that while there was potential to build social movements out of online communities, success was highest in those networks that had pre-existing offline relationships. Interestingly, his research also shows that groups with the least radical interests benefited the most from computer-mediated communication.

Diani's (2000) research and the findings of the present study suggest that the connective power SNSs provide will not translate easily or automatically into civic engagement, without this purpose being clearly articulated. The absence of such efforts on BlackPlanet also likely reflects the persistent absence of voices of locally, nationally, or internationally known black leaders on the site. The effects of this absence can be seen by comparing BlackPlanet with the July 2006 success of a coalition of well-connected black gay bloggers, such as scholar and commentator Keith Boykin. These bloggers, when they became outraged by an HIV/AIDS fundraising concert's roster of performances by anti-gay artists, were able to turn their swell of online dialoguing into offline protest in just a few days (Byrne, *in press*). This is not to say that organized efforts cannot emerge on BlackPlanet without "real" (offline) faces to legitimize them. However, the absence of "known" community figures or leaders on online social networks is one of the major distinctions between traditional black social networks and these online ones.

That participants are so heavily invested in ongoing dialogues about black community issues but do not take steps to address them raises three important questions for future research on black SNS:

- 1) Is the limited interest in civic engagement found in this study the result of the medium?
- 2) Is the limited interest in civic engagement found in this study indicative of a decline in such activities in the community in general?

- 3) Is the limited interest in civic engagement found in this study perhaps just an early stage in the transition to online social networking?

The literature includes several examples where blacks have used community websites (Everett, 2002) and blogs (Byrne, *in press*; Pole, 2007) to encourage civic engagement. Further work should explore whether participants on black SNSs see these spaces as being purely for entertainment or socializing purposes, without any ability to impact their real world conditions. As the example of First Fridays at the beginning of this article showed, black social networks have typically serviced members' social as well as civic interests—the two were not seen as mutually exclusive. Given this history, research should investigate further whether black online social networks represent a shift away from offline traditions.

Although limited interest in community issues is a seemingly common criticism of young people today, research that explores social network usage by blacks would be a significant contribution to the literature. Given that some research shows that African American youth are “the most politically engaged racial/ethnic group” (Ketter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002), of special interest is whether young black participants in online social network sites are less inclined to become involved in the community or are just less inclined to take online discussions about the community as seriously as they would face-to-face discussions.

While there is little indication in the findings that participants currently use the connective capabilities of a site like BlackPlanet for traditional civic engagement, this does not necessarily mean that such uses are not on the horizon. Given that BlackPlanet is fairly unique, as one of the few black sites that is long running, has millions of users, and fits within the SNS genre, it is much too early to predict whether the near-complete absence of civic engagement seen in this study is a pattern that will hold. The online social networking format itself is still relatively new, and figuring out how to employ it to serve a higher social purpose may take some time, even for a community that has an extensive tradition of civically-minded social networks.

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Notes

- 1 I have relied on Ehrlich's (2000) and Delli Carpini's (n.d.) definitions of civic engagement throughout this study. Civic engagement in this case encompasses the actions individuals or groups take in order to address issues of public concern. These actions can include volunteerism, electoral participation, serving on a neighborhood

- association, and so on (Delli Carpini, n.d.). This definition is discussed further in the methodology section of the article.
- 2 Habermas (1989) argues, through a Kantian analysis, that civil society allows a citizen to engage in a debate over the general rules of governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange in social labor“ (p. 27). For Kant (1990), civil society in Europe relied on the private citizen’s public use of his reason. However, for a discussion on alternative public spheres, see Fraser (1992) who offers a gendered critique of public space.
 - 3 As a participant observer in this study, I did not communicate with any of the discussion participants or contribute to the community forums.
 - 4 In this article, the term ”discussion thread“ is used to refer to an initiating message (topic) and all responses it receives.
 - 5 Forum threads are usually created by site members, although in some cases, BlackPlanet staff will create threads, especially about current events. In order to create a thread, registered members click on “start a new topic” within the desired forum; a title and description of the issue, topic, or question can then be added. Once a new topic is submitted to the forum, other members can respond to it. Responses are threaded, with the most recent post appearing below the initial description. The initial description always remains at the top of the screen.
 - 6 All screen names of BlackPlanet participants quoted in this study have been modified.

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