#IFTHEYGUNNEDMEDOWN: HOW ETHICS, GENDER, AND RACE INTERSECT WHEN RESEARCHING RACE AND RACISM ON TUMBLR

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ABSTRACT

Challenges related to digital social research have centered upon protection of the participants whose activity online create the data sets used for study. Ethical issues related to digital participant protection include how researchers interact with research participants. Some researchers argue that particular sites online should be considered "public," and as a public site of study, that type of digital research does not require participant permission to study. More recently, there has been a push from some editors to researchers to contact individuals to obtain their permission to be studied, even for areas online that might have been regarded as public. In this essay, I share how ethics, gender, and race intersect when researching race and racism on Tumblr through #IfTheyGunnedMeDown.

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1   INTRODUCTION

Challenges related to digital social research have centered upon protection of the participants whose activity online create the data sets used for study. Ethical issues related to digital participant protection include how researchers interact with research participants. Some researchers argue that particular sites online should be considered "public," and as a public site of study, that type of digital research does not require participant permission to study. More recently, there has been a push from some editors to researchers to contact individuals to obtain their permission to be studied, even for areas online that might have been regarded as public. In this essay, I share how ethics, gender, and race intersect when researching race and racism on Tumblr through #IfTheyGunnedMeDown.

2   CONTEXT

On August 9, 2014, unarmed Black 18-year-old teenager Michael Brown was shot and killed by 28-year-old white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. As media outlets began to cover the story, some news outlets chose an image of Brown that featured him as a high school graduate, in traditional cap and gown, holding a diploma cover. Other news sources picked a more controversial picture of Brown in a basketball jersey, holding his fingers up in what some termed as a "gang sign." In response, Mississippi attorney C.J. Lawrence started the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, with which social media users posted two different pictures of themselves, one hegemonically "positive" and the other "negative" (both concepts are racialized). Implied within the hashtag was the question, made literal on the Tumblr with the same name: "Which picture would they use?" The use of "they" and "me" is an implied critique of the ways in which white-dominated mass media ("they") choose to portray people of color ("me"), particularly regarding the decision of which photo, with accompanying positive or negative connotations, to run alongside a story when a member of a minoritized group has been killed.

As an activist scholar, I was drawn to #IfTheyGunnedMeDown as a form of social media activism by and for the African American community. I chose the hashtag as it lived on a particular Tumblr site as a research topic to prioritize the full, unfettered voice of participants: Tumblr allows for captions by those posting photos that exceed the 144-character limit of Twitter, providing crucial, contextual description of each post in the words of the individuals themselves. I examined the entire archive of #IfTheyGunnedMeDown posts on one Tumblr[1]. My data set spanned from August 11 to August 21, 2014, which were the dates of activity for this Tumblr. All of the images were selected and shared publicly by various users in nearly 250 individual Tumblr posts.

Of those posts, the vast majority (95%) appeared to reflect African American digital practices, upon which I presented at the 2015 annual conference of the

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[1] See: iftheygunnedmedown.tumblr.com

Association of Internet Researchers. Recently, building upon my earlier research for a different study, I decided to focus on the 5% of participants that identified, through chosen username, explicit photo, or linguistic content, as *not* Black.

As I began to write my results with the goal of gaining insight into how solidarity is enacted across racial boundaries, I prepared quotes and excerpts from online participant testimony on this Tumblr, which is normally common practice for "public" artifacts in internet studies. After I submitted an initial draft, I received a query from an editor about contacting individuals to obtain their explicit permission to be studied.

On the surface, the request is well-intentioned and protects Tumblr users, especially in light of recent debates about ownership and quotations of publicly-available internet commentary. However, this query prompts two complicated considerations related to research ethics when it comes to privacy issues in studying race and racism on Tumblr, revealing a terrain of power that is not as straightforward as it seems, especially for a woman of color researcher.

3   PERMISSIONS: POTENTIAL HARM TO THE PARTICIPANT?

An ethical issue for digital social researchers is to protect the privacy of online users. Yet, how does a digital social researcher track down permissions in Tumblr, a space that is notoriously ephemeral? Some Tumblr users change their name, such that the name may not be reflected in the permalink at the bottom of their post. Or, Tumblr users may deactivate their account, whose page will then lead to the error message of "Whatever you were looking for doesn't currently exist at this address." To put it another way: If Tumblr users don't even "currently exist," can we cause them harm?

There are other ways to try to contact users, such as looking for a person's username in a general online search or putting a person's username (especially if the Tumblr username appears to be a person's legal name) into Facebook or Twitter, to see if the results might lead to an email address or another way to reach the person. In some instances, Tumblr users do opt to connect their Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus, to their publicly-available info on Tumblr. However, those methods for seeking a person's identity are *also* fraught with ethical questions: Regardless of whether I could find the person, *should* I be using these other online avenues to narrow the distance between the person on Tumblr and the person off of Tumblr? By doing so, in my attempt to get their permission, am I actually trampling upon the person's privacy? To what extent should the researcher go in the pursuit of obtaining permission, while still preserving the privacy of the participant? In which cases should attempts to obtain permission from users suffice as due diligence and "ethical practice" by a researcher?

4   PERMISSION: POTENTIAL HARM TO THE RESEARCHER?

Beyond the logistical issues of whether contacting a participant is even possible, or whether trying to find a way to reach the participant might violate the participant's privacy, the question of potential harm to the *researcher* arises when it comes to studying topics of race and racism. As a woman of color, my reaching out to individuals whose Tumblr presence I might critique in any way as problematic puts *me* in a vulnerable position. Users that later read my work and interpret the way I portrayed their Tumblr activity as negative, racist, or problematic might want to retaliate, and my contacting the person to obtain their permission has suddenly made the person's access to me easier than if I had not tried to seek the person's permission initially.

It is as if the adage of not talking to strangers from fear of harm becomes even more salient when it comes to examinations of online discourses about race by researchers from underrepresented backgrounds themselves. For example, what are the extra considerations that a researcher of color should take when analyzing *racists* on Tumblr? How far should the
researcher go in supplying contact information to Tumblr participants in an ethically-led study? Some of these issues might be addressed during the institutional review board (IRB) process, but IRB protocols and standards are usually highly one-sided to protect the participant only, presuming the safety of the researcher -- an example of a default presumption of embodied whiteness. Ultimately, how should the relationship between the privacy of the researcher and the privacy of the participant be weighed, given both the unequal power dynamics of conducting research and the unequal power dynamics of white/male supremacy?

5   ALLIANCE, SPACE, AND POSITIONALITY

So, what does online discourse reveal about perceived commonalities and differences between Black and non-Black participants on the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown Tumblr? Overall, everyone that was included on this Tumblr, irrespective of race, purported to be treated similarly in terms of bias to how Michael Brown was portrayed by the media. Examples from Asian and Latina users reflected self-described positionalities similar to and adjacent to those from the Black community, in acts of alliance. Those demonstrations were in contrast to examples from white users that came across as invasive, problematic reflections of white privilege, colonizing a digital space that presumed a safe commonality in non-whiteness. Not all spaces are meant for all people. Not all biases in the media operate the same way across the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality. And not all requests for permission from participants fall evenly on researchers: in the pursuit of protecting participant privacy, researchers from minoritized populations have additional considerations for protecting our own privacy to minimize harm both to the participant and researcher.