Chapter 3

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Digital Legacies

Nicole Cooke*

We all have digital footprints and legacies, even if we aren't the ones actively curating our own trajectories. Virtually every move we make online is tracked in some way, and the digital crumbs, fingerprints, and dossiers we produce are used to market products, steal identities, and otherwise surveil us for a variety of reasons (NBC Nightly News Films 2019). Digital legacies are applicable to individuals and collective groups of people.

This can be particularly salient for people of color and other marginalized people who are created, demonized, or unduly hyped by the media. Remember how Pastor Jeremiah Wright was vilified in the name of accountability shortly before Senator Barack Obama became the forty-fourth president of the United States in 2008? Or when Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's innocuous college dance video was unearthed and circulated in 2019 in an effort to discredit her and minimize her elected position? These are classic cases of distraction through discrimination and respectability politics.

Consider young Black adults Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, and Freddie Gray, who all died in encounters with police and were criticized for being at fault and not obeying the rules. All of them had negative images and stories circulated about them, while the involved White officers were said to be under duress, became the recipients of fundraisers, and were never convicted of any wrongdoing. At most, the officers were considered rogue and "bad apples"; this was the leading narrative instead of the emphasis of these stories being on the people who were so discriminated against that they ultimately lost their lives.

After Michael Brown's death in 2014, the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown appeared on Twitter to refute pictures of Brown peddled by the mainstream media showing him in a basketball jersey or staring "menacingly" at the camera, and unbelievably he was even shown lying dead in the street, suggesting that he deserved no compassion or humanity. The media controlling his narrative and trying to create his digital legacy chose not to show his high school graduation photo, which was taken just weeks before his death. With Brown, Bland, Gray, and so many others, the media paints people of color with disdain, writing grim, "urban" stories of incorrigible miscreants who somehow deserved their fates. And this same media, more often than not, describes and depicts White suspects in acceptable terms and respectable attire in an effort to paint them as "youth gone wrong" (Wing 2014). Suggesting that the media's actions are essentially character assassinations designed to perpetuate racism and Black stereotypes, Wing states,

> News reports often headline claims from police or other officials that appear unsympathetic or dismissive of black victims. Other times, the headlines seem to suggest that black victims are to blame for their own deaths, engaging in what critics sometimes allege is a form of character assassination. When contrasted with media portrayal of white suspects and accused murderers, the differences are more striking. News outlets often choose to run headlines that exhibit an air of disbelief at an alleged white killer's supposed actions. Sometimes, they appear to go out of their way to boost

* **Dr. Nicole A. Cooke** is the Augusta Baker Endowed Chair and an associate professor at the School of Library and Information Science at the University of South Carolina. Dr. Cooke is a 2012 graduate of Rutgers University with a PhD in communication, information, and library studies. She holds an MLS degree from Rutgers University and an MEd in adult education from Pennsylvania State University. Dr. Cooke's research and teaching interests include human information behavior, fake news consumption and resistance, critical cultural information studies, and diversity and social justice in librarianship (with an emphasis on infusing them into LIS education and pedagogy).

> the suspect's character, carrying quotes from relatives or acquaintances that often paint even alleged murderers in a positive light. (2014, para. 4)

Even when subsequent community uprisings occurred in protest of these tragic deaths, Black and Brown community members were further castigated, maced, and arrested for defending the criminals and wrongdoers that were Bland, Brown, and Gray, and they were referred to as looters in mainstream media. Again, the underlying chain of events and the unwarranted deaths of minorities were ignored and twisted.

In these and many more examples, digital legacy becomes a form of accountability that is applied differently and unevenly depending on the persons or groups in question. Whiteness is amplified, and anything or anyone else becomes "othered," which results in Black, Brown, and other marginalized peoples becoming further excluded and stereotyped. Whiteness is presented as good or redeemable, and otherness is presented as bad and irredeemable. Digital legacies amplify both whiteness and otherness, but in opposite ways. The digital legacies of whiteness are created in sand or snow and can be manipulated, changed, or erased. The digital legacies of others are created in cement.

For example, in 2015 Brock Turner, a Stanford University student and athlete, was convicted of felony sexual assault for attacking an unconscious young woman in an alley. However, he was sentenced to only six months in jail because the judge in the case thought Turner had potential and shouldn't have his future ruined in prison. Men of color have to be subjected to "stop and frisk" initiatives and have served decades in prison for marijuana possession, arguably a much lesser crime than rape. Why haven't scores of minority men been given the same opportunity and benefit of the doubt that Turner was given? The media has largely forgotten Turner, but that did not stop the media from second-guessing and berating his victim, an Asian American woman named Chanel Jones, when she recounted her experiences in a 2019 memoir (Neary 2019). This biased accountability is rooted in stereotypes, prejudice, racism, whiteness, and heteronormativity and allows the status quo and the hierarchy to be maintained. Mainstream media, and now social media (e.g., Facebook trolls and Twitter mobs), exacerbates and perpetuates this phenomenon. The media can act as judge and jury and perpetuate false, stereotypical, and damaging misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, and as a result, digital legacies are often at the media's mercy. People of color and other minorities are often villainized, and nonminorities are redeemed and glorified.

Existing at Our Own Expense

In a video decrying the apparent blackface appearance of Kim Kardashian and the perceived ongoing cultural appropriation by her entire family, Black actress and comedian Amanda Seales (2019) stated that Black people "exist at our own expense." The cultures of people of color are valued and mined, but the people themselves are not, and this is something people of color and others are faced with every day. In certain instances, they might be considered model minorities, but that won't ensure that they have positive experiences or digital legacies.

Among the reasons stereotypical digital legacies are so problematic and far-reaching is because minorities and others are not in control of their own narratives.

> Communities of color, low-income individuals, and those living in the margins have seldom been in control of telling their own stories. When white people and mainstream media control the overriding narrative, black people are disenfranchised. (Divided by Design 2019)

When narratives are controlled by the powerful, diverse information and perspectives are omitted, or even lost or not valued. For example, in 2019 it was been reported in non–United States news that the Uighur people, an ethnic minority group who are active practitioners of the Muslim faith in China's Xinjiang province, are being tortured by the Chinese government and sent to internment camps. Very little about this atrocity has been covered in the United States mainstream media (perhaps because of the stigma placed upon Muslims worldwide), and social media has actually sanctioned those who speak about the issue (Al Jazeera 2019).

Within the United States there are ongoing factions in the media, some catering to the right and others catering to the left, and yet others claiming to be in the middle or neutral. Unfortunately, all media has some kind of bias, and none of them are neutral, particularly when a small number of conglomerates own the majority of media outlets. Routinely referred to as propaganda for forty-fifth US president Donald Trump, Fox News has been called out for omitting and falsifying information and routinely presenting inflammatory and racist rhetoric. In December 2019, the political program *Meet the Press with Chuck Todd*, which airs on MSNBC and is considered to be more liberal than Fox News, was criticized on social media for polling affluent White voters in Iowa about the impending 2020 US presidential election, referring to these interviewees as a representation of US voters (NBC News 2019). Because of the current electoral college system, Iowa is a very important place for aspiring candidates

to win over, but Iowa by no means reflects the racial, ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, or class diversity in the United States, and it was misleading of *Meet the Press* to say otherwise. Misinformation and disinformation come from a variety of sources and in a variety of ways, and regrettably, a lot of it is not recognized, questioned, or challenged.

Just as harmful as omitting or deliberately falsifying, twisting, or cherry-picking information is using stereotypes and microaggressions in misinformation and disinformation. Stereotypes are used to control the narratives about groups that are different, marginalized, or "othered." They prevent minorities from being seen as individuals and facilitate the perception that minorities are comparable to animals or unflattering inanimate objects that are not worthy of the same humanity as members of the majority. Consider the fact that Black people, including children, have historically been depicted as apes and monkeys in literature and popular culture (Campbell 2019); K–12 textbooks omit or deny the details and context of slavery and genocide; the forty-fifth president of the United States called Mexicans rapists and mocked people with disabilities; Black academics are tokenized, fetishized, and called "rare creatures" (Starr 2019); Black actresses, and Black women in general, are discriminated against because their hair is "too Black" (McDaniels 2019); women of color are called angry and punished for showing emotion even when they are demeaned or discriminated against (Prasad 2018; Schmidt 2018).

Along with this lack of access to creating and controlling their own narratives and legacies, minorities face risk and rebuke when they do dare to attempt to control their own stories (Cooke 2018a). As mentioned in the previous paragraph, labels such as *angry*, *aggressive*, *hostile*, *sensitive*, *misinformed*, and so on are used to stifle and discourage narratives and experiences that deviate from the status quo and live outside of heteronormative checkboxes and racist tropes. Emotions also keep stereotypes from being debunked and dismissed; emotions such as fear, anger, hatred, and jealousy allow misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation to take root and make them very difficult to correct or dispel (Cooke 2017, 2018b).

The pros and cons of technology use, particularly as it pertains to perpetuating stereotypes and heteronormativity, has been a long-term discussion in the literature. Carey ([1989] 1992) wrote that technologies are representations of the culture in which they exist, and as such they cannot be viewed or accepted as neutral or free of biases. Nakamura (2006) concurred by suggesting this also applies to objects and messages on the internet—they are manifestations of the larger culture and need to be examined and critiqued in a critical and cultural way. Internet messages are part of a "contemporary constellation of racism, globalization, and technoculture" and should be viewed as such (Nakamura 2006, 30). Brock (2009) continued this line of inquiry by stating that cultural images, online texts, and the electronic media that house them are products of the overall culture and society and should be viewed as potential vehicles of race, power, and discrimination.

A particular technology that has been widely discussed and criticized is YouTube, especially its problematic algorithms that recommend supposedly similar videos and content. Algorithmic bias is certainly not new or restricted to YouTube, but because of the proverbial rabbit holes that it can open up, it has warranted special attention. In the *New York Times*, various writers (Fisher and Taub 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Fisher and Bennhold 2018) wrote specifically about the radicalization that seems to be a result of YouTube's propensity for showing "related videos" that contain racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, and extremist content, conspiracy theories, and comments containing even more egregious jokes and language shared by users (Simon and Bowman 2019). While the recommendation system and autoplay feature on YouTube may seem innocuous, they are actually an insidious way to spread misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation.

> YouTube's recommendation system is engineered to maximize watchtime, among other factors, the company says, but not to favor any political ideology. The system suggests what to watch next, often playing the videos automatically, in a never-ending quest to keep us glued to our screens.
>
> But the emotions that draw people in—like fear, doubt, and anger—are often central features of conspiracy theories, and in particular, experts say, of right-wing extremism.
>
> As the system suggests more provocative videos to keep users watching, it can direct them toward extreme content they might otherwise never find. And it is designed to lead users to new topics to pique new interest. (Fisher and Taub 2019a, paras. 13–15)

Disrupting the Status Quo

While technology is certainly an issue, it's not going to heal itself. Information creators, consumers, and users must take responsibility for what they're doing online, and as much as possible need to take back the narratives that will ultimately result in their digital legacies. Users must make concerted, consistent, and informed efforts to cut through noisy digital information ecosystem to get to the truth (Terrill 2019). We have to be *in* the media and *understand* the media in

order to *disrupt* the media. When the media actually attempts some type of self-reflexivity, it recommends that people, especially children, reduce their screen time and vary their information consumption. That's an adequate start, but that will never be enough, not with the plethora of information people encounter in the course of a day. More people of color and minorities need to be in the media ecosystem creating, curating, and evaluating content; a critical mass of racially literate, compassionate, and empathetic information producers are needed to change the tide of racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and so on media coverage and digital legacy creation. Among the ways to move toward this goal is for educators and caregivers to be proactive in instilling media and information literacy skills and adept in having hard conversations and teaching hard histories. Cooke (2018b), De Abreu (2019), and Mackey and Jacobson (2014) are but a few of the practitioners and researchers who provide concrete strategies to implement information literacy, media literacy, and metaliteracy, which are the skills needed to become more adept at information evaluation and become savvier information producers and consumers. These are skills that have no age or expiration. Rather, they encourage readers to actively engage with information instead of just receiving and accepting information, good or bad, as a fait accompli.

Furthermore, Cooke (2018a) described the particularly acute need for people to be culturally competent and intellectually humble when creating and evaluating information. A culturally competent and racially literate writer, reporter, or producer would never have published pictures of Michael Brown lying dead in the street; they would have been cognizant of his humanity and aware of the damage the wrong pictures would do to his digital legacy. To this end, we all need to engage in counterstorytelling—storytelling that bucks the norm. This includes critiquing and trying to correct misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, and it also includes telling personal stories. Pearson (2019) provided a salient example of this. Traveling to Nebraska to deliver a talk, this Muslim scholar became privy to a social media campaign disparaging her and her perceived intent to "brainwash" the white children at the school. Pearson recounted her fear and anxiety, but instead of letting this encounter cow her or let this negative digital legacy live on unchallenged, she wrote about the experience, refuted the racist and Islamophobic rhetoric, and reclaimed her narrative. Reclaiming narratives is not easy, but this is part of the hard work required by counterstorytelling. Cobran (2020), Kay (2018), and other educators are instructive on the art of having these hard conversations and telling courageous counterstories.

Perhaps our digital legacies should be left to the discretion of the individuals or groups in question, but that is not always the case, not in today's technological world. This means that people need to be more than just passive consumers. They need to be proactive creators of information and forethoughtful stewards of their own digital legacies and the legacies of others, especially those who are marginalized. It takes consistency, reflection, and effort, but the work invested will surely improve the legacies of all.

References

Al Jazeera. 2019. "Teen's TikTok 'Makeup Tutorial' Condemning China Goes Viral." November 27, 2019. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/teen-tiktok-tutorial-condemning-china-viral-19112708 2757584.html.

Brock, André. 2009. "Life on the Wire: Deconstructing Race on the Internet." *Information, Communication and Society* 12, no. 3: 344–63.

Campbell, Edith. 2019. "The Problem with Picture Book Monkeys: Racist Imagery Associating Simians with Black People Has a Long History." *School Library Journal*, December 4, 2019. https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=The-problem-with-picture-book-monkeys-racist-imagery-libraries.

Carey, James W. (1989) 1992. *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. New York: Routledge.

Cobran, Krystle. 2020. *The Brave Educator: Honest Conversations about Navigating Race in the Classroom*. New York: Routledge.

Cooke, Nicole A. 2017. "Posttruth, Truthiness, and Alternative Facts: Information Behavior and Critical Information Consumption for a New Age." *Library Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (July): 211–21.

———. 2018a. "Critical Literacy as an Approach to Combating Cultural Misinformation/Disinformation on the Internet." In *Information Literacy and Libraries in the Age of Fake News*, edited by Denise E. Agosto, 36–51. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.

———. 2018b. *Fake News and Alternative Facts: Information Literacy in a Post-truth Era*. Chicago: American Library Association.

De Abreu, Belinha S. 2019. *Teaching Media Literacy*, 2nd ed. Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman.

Divided by Design. 2019. "Control of One's Personal Narrative." October 2019. https://www.dividedbydesign.org/modals/insights/6.

Fisher, Max, and Katrin Bennhold. 2018. "As Germans Seek News, YouTube Delivers Far-Right Tirades." *New York Times*, September 7, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/07/world/europe/youtube-far-right-extremism.html.

Fisher, Max, and Amanda Taub. 2018. "Is the Algorithmification of the Human Experience a Good

Thing?" The Interpreter, *New York Times*, September 6, 2018. https://static.nytimes.com/email-content/INT_5362.html.

———. 2019a. "How YouTube Radicalized Brazil." *New York Times*, August 11, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/11/world/americas/youtube-brazil.html.

———. 2019b. "On YouTube's Digital Playground, an Open Gate for Pedophiles." *New York Times*, June 3, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/03/world/americas/youtube-pedophiles.html.

Kay, Matthew R. 2018. *Not Light, but Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Stenhouse.

Mackey, Thomas P., and Trudi E. Jacobson. 2014. *Metaliteracy: Reinventing Information Literacy to Empower Learners*. Chicago: American Library Association.

McDaniels, Andrea K. 2019. "Stop Policing Black Women's Hair." *Baltimore Sun*, December 6, 2019. https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/op-ed/bs-ed-op-1206-black-women-hair-20191205-fepttsymkvf3nfheji2pzg2mt4-story.html.

Nakamura, Lisa. 2006. "Cultural Difference, Theory, and Cyberculture Studies: A Case of Mutual Repulsion." In *Critical Cyberculture Studies*, edited by David Silver and Adrienne Massanari, 29–36. New York: New York University Press.

NBC News. 2019. "Meet the Press—December 1, 2020." *Meet the Press with Chuck Todd*, December 1, 2020. https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meet-press-december-1-2019-n1093781.

NBC Nightly News Films. 2019. "Privacy and Power: Your Digital Fingerprint," part 2. December 9, 2019. Online video, 6:42. https://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/privacy-and-power-your-digital-fingerprint-part-2-74786373977.

Neary, Lynn. 2019. "Victim of Brock Turner Sexual Assault Reveals Her Identity." Books, NPR, September 4, 2019. https://www.npr.org/2019/09/04/757626939/victim-of-brock-turner-sexual-assault-reveals-her-identity.

Pearson, Ferial. 2019. "Deceit Wrapped in Kindness." Medium, August 28, 2019. https://medium.com/@FerialP/deceit-wrapped-in-kindness-3498de1dec55.

Prasad, Ritu. 2018. "Serena Williams and the Trope of the 'Angry Black Woman.'" BBC News, September 11, 2018. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45476500.

Schmidt, Samantha. 2018. "Why Serena Williams's Frustration Was Far Too Familiar for Many Black Women." *Washington Post*, September 11, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2018/09/11/why-serena-williamss-frustration-was-far-too-familiar-many-black-women.

Seales, Amanda (@amandaseales). 2019. "Kim K Blackface #signedsealesdelivered No ma'am." December 20, 2019. Instagram video, 6:45. https://www.instagram.com/p/B6SggykJPn6/.

Starr, G. Gabrielle. 2019. "Black Scholars Are Not 'Rare Creatures.'" Opinion, *New York Times*, December 4, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/04/opinion/purdue-mitch-daniels-creatures.html.

Simon, Scott, and Emma Bowman. 2019. "How One Mom Talks to Her Sons about Hate on the Internet." Technology, NPR, August 17, 2019. https://www.npr.org/2019/08/17/751986787/writer-joanna-schroeder-on-preventing-teenage-boys-from-turning-to-hate?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=npr&utm_term=nprnews&utm_content=20190817.

Terrill, Marshall. 2019. "News Co/Lab Director Helps Public Understanding of How News Works." *ASU Now*, Arizona State University, December 10, 2019. https://asunow.asu.edu/20191210-solutions-news-colab-director-helps-public-understanding-how-news-works?fbclid=IwAR1Y-lf-y1Vp4qmydRsg9jV8Pa_7u3EPycxz06_fGJurY5ekpYgc0tRgK-Q.

Wing, Nick. 2014. "When the Media Treats White Suspects and Killers Better Than Black Victims." Black Voices, Huffpost, August 14, 2014, last updated December 6, 2017. www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/14/media-black-victims_n_5673291.html.