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Black Participation in the Development of Digital Spaces: A Conversation with Charlton McIlwain

By: Charlton McIlwain

PLATFORMS & INFRASTRUCTURE

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Just Tech invited several practitioners and researchers to respond to a simple yet fundamental question: "What is just technology?" This interview was conducted by Just Tech program director [Catalina Vallejo](#), who spoke with [Charlton McIlwain](#), about the role Black and people of color played, and continue to play, in the development of digital technology.

McIlwain is professor of media, culture, and communication at NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, the founder of [Center for Critical Race and Digital Studies](#), and the author of [Black Software: The Internet & Racial Justice, From the AfroNet to Black Lives Matter](#) (Oxford University Press, 2019).

In their conversation, Vallejo and McIlwain discuss his book, [Black Software](#), the history of Black folks' role in technological developments, and the importance of understanding technology through a critical race lens.

Catalina Vallejo (CV): Charlton, thank you so much for talking with us. I would like to start with a broad question, can you tell us about your trajectory and where you started? When did technology become one of the main things that you were worried about?

Charlton McIlwain (CM): At the start of my career, my research focused on electoral spaces and the ways political candidates marshal race-based appeals in order to gain some type of competitive edge in

elections. I was interested in how that affected issues around representation and the democratic ideals connected to that. Around 2005 or 2006, a colleague and I started a blog that was called *This Week in Race*, one of the first blogs written by academics. This was our way of trying to think about broader public engagement with scholarly ideas. That was a starting point in terms of my connection with technology. What I found in subsequent years was that the people whom I engaged with on these questions were doing their work online and through digital platforms of one kind or another.

Are there ways that we can see the structure of digital platforms facilitating racial inequality and discrimination?

It was around 2010 when I began to fixate on the medium itself, on technology, as a subject of study. When I first came to this area, I naively thought that there was a lot of work already done. To my surprise, there had not been on the questions I was interested in: Is the internet racist fundamentally? Are there ways that we can see the structure of digital platforms facilitating racial inequality and discrimination? What does that look like in this digital context? Those were the questions that first motivated me. Shortly after starting to pursue that, Black Lives Matter (BLM) happened, Ferguson, Trayvon Martin, all these things, and I began to be interested in the connection between digital media technology and racial justice activism. All these things have been part of how I first got into thinking about the role that race plays in technology and technological development.

CV: One of the arguments that you make in your book *Black Software* is that history has overlooked the role Black and brown people have had on the internet. So, I wanted to ask, how did you get to this project? And, what didn't make it to the book?

CM: Great questions. I first began to think about what ultimately became *Black Software* by thinking about movements and Black Lives Matter, and how BLM came about in this moment in our history of civil rights, organizing, and activism. This movement is essentially the most influential thing to happen since the tail end of the 1960s and its raising to public prominence, again, issues of race, issues about race and the criminal justice system, all of those issues that have reared their heads over the years, but not in a sustained way, both in media, public opinion, and public policy. I was motivated to try to understand how that came about and what the role of digital media and digital tools had in helping to make that happen.

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I had enough sense and understanding to know that moments like the BLM movement don't materialize out of nothing. I wanted to try to understand just a little bit more about where that activism came from. In my mind, there was a beginning point to that story and at the farthest reaches were around 1994 or 1995, when the internet really comes to prominence as a public tool that's accessible to folks beyond

academic institutions, scientific institutions, or the government. That's where I began looking. I started by talking to Black folks who were online at that time. And I found two things.

Number one, that the nomenclature about the digital divide, which has been prominent since the early 1990s, papered over the fact that there were millions of Black folks online in the early 1990s. The second one came as I interviewed a guy named William Murrell. I asked him a question that was a conversation starter: When did you first go online? I thought I knew what the answer would be. But when I talked with William, he stammered a little bit and ultimately said, "About 1978." And, I replied, "What the hell are you talking about?"

I asked him to tell me more about this story, what he was doing online, and what online meant for him in 1978. William's answer was my first push to realize that there was much more to the story than just thinking about the connections between a select group of people in the early '90s to our present, or the present moment with Black Lives Matter. That was the moment in which the book took a more historical turn. If we go back to the early 1960s where you have both the birth and maturation of modern computing and the height of the civil rights movement happening at once, what stories would we find that would help us define, articulate, give some insight into the long relationship that Black folks and other people of color had with technology to really provide that historical arc to contextualize every point of significant technological development from the 1960s up through our present? That's where that book took a turn.



It had not been what I pitched to the publisher. It was also a new way of writing for me. Unlike my scholarly trajectory as a social scientist, I had to now think about the narrative playing a prominent role in the book instead of the primary data on which my work was built on.

I also had to consider what stories to leave out. There are so many, but I had made a decision to make this very broad historical connection from the 1960s up through our present, which meant having to leave out so much.

One story that I left out, and have subsequently gone back to, was the incredible role that several civil rights pioneers played in helping us articulate what our technology future could be like in the 1960s. Stories that are not part of the historical record of how our technological development happened, who made what choices about what to build and how to use it. I do talk a little bit in the book about Roy Wilkins, who's a civil rights pioneer and longtime head of the NAACP, who, in his writing and his speeches, talked a lot about computers and the role that they were playing in his day and age, which he could see dovetailing closely with issues around race, particularly in issues of economic development and the labor force, but also in terms of issues around representation and criminality.

There's also a lot of interesting threads around the role of Indigenous folks, particularly at the dawn of the web. Many were stalwart web evangelists and saw the web as a new opportunity to retake control of their identity against a dominant set of narratives and stereotypes.

CV: Going back to all the stories that didn't make the book, can you talk more about the importance of thinking about race when we are thinking about technology?

CM: I think the connecting point for me is with computing technology at the beginning. If we think about the 1960s and the dawn of computing technologies' rise as a popular medium—I'm thinking of the stories of Fred Turner's book, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, that highlights that moment—and we jump forward several decades to the early 1990s when the internet comes online, those are two moments of technological development and thinking where the dominant philosophy was race blind, meaning folks in the 1960s were not making connections at all between computing technology and race or thinking about its relationship to racialized people. In the 1990s, the narratives shifted to the internet being salvific and freeing us from all these connections of race, skin color, and the types of physical traits that lie at the foundation of so much discrimination.

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Historically, technology has been painted as race neutral, race free, or race blind, which has been the dominant way to think about it. In our present day, this perspective has led to many folks having the conception that, when technology's harm toward people of color becomes evident, the fixes lay with technology. If I could just tinker and make the code less biased or the algorithm less biased, I can fix this problem. I think that assumption comes directly from having a historical understanding in which technology and race are seen as having been completely separate. One of the things I wanted to do in the book is show how those two things were fundamentally connected at the very beginning.

Racial dynamics lie at the heart of how we conceived of technology, what it could do, how it would help us, what problems we would ask it to solve. For me, what was both exciting and unsettling was to arrive at that particular historical moment and to see how stark and explicit the rationale was to say, “We have new computing tools that have helped us gain an edge over our competitors on war and space exploration; and why don’t we mobilize it to tackle our ‘race problem’,” which was our Negro problem, as they called it at that particular time.

Our problem wasn’t around how racism and white supremacy emerged. It was the fact that Black people and other people of color were challenging the racial order and system of power, which was seen through the lens of Black and brown criminality. For many people in power that was the problem that we then called upon computing technology to solve. In the introduction and at the end of the book, I pose a question, that is largely rhetorical: Can our new technological tools ever help us outrun white supremacy?

What we have to contend with is that factor that has been with us all along and well before our modern computing technology came to be and living in a society and in a world that is (1) fundamentally racialized and (2) built on white supremacy. Using that as a starting point, that our new technology and technological affordances are built in and through and among demonstrates the ways in which technology itself is fundamentally racialized and takes on a character that is bound up with relationships to different groups of people in one way or another.

CV: What do we win by thinking about technology through the lens of critical race theory and not only thinking about how race matters?

CM: In some way, if we look back 10 years and think about our discourses around technology, both popular and academic, and if we look at the historical record about technology development, I think that the normative moment is the story of technology without a critical race lens. It is an engagement with technology as some kind of disembodied, disconnected material thing that wasn’t built in and among a set of broader issues, of which race was most important, and not thinking fundamentally about issues of power, position, history, or inequality in connection with technology.

In fact, I could turn, as a relative newbie to technology studies around that time, and see a fairly bare landscape of scholarship. How do we do things with new technological tools and this ideal that technology is race neutral and race free and there for us to do as we like?

Instead of looking at our technological systems as the result of a great past of pioneers and scientists who had a fundamentally great impact on the world, we can examine how technology has been the medium through which we have affected all of these negative things around discrimination.

The value of a critical race lens when thinking about technology is primarily to say, “Hold up, let’s go

back. Let's ask all of these questions about history and power and position and voice and representation and tell a different story about technological development." Instead of looking at our technological systems as the result of a great past of pioneers and scientists who had a fundamentally great impact on the world, we can examine how technology has been the medium through which we have affected all of these negative things around discrimination.

Technology wasn't and has never been the thing to help us perfect democracy, to perfect the way that we engage with humanity on an egalitarian basis: It has been fundamentally a tool for oppression, a tool to help those in power maintain that power and to do so by building systems and structures that fundamentally disadvantage people that are not white, straight, and male at every turn.

CV: Charlton, I want to ask you about the projects that you are working on now related to these questions about technology and race.

CM: Absolutely. I would say I spend the bulk of my time in this particular area now thinking about the future in terms of our technology and the possibilities of something different. Will our technological future merely mimic our past or is there a way to shift that in some meaningful and significant way? For me, that's really come about in terms of thinking and working more in the area of organizing scholars and scholarship to really think about these things. Around 2015 or 2016 I founded the Center for Critical Race and Digital Studies, which at the time was a network of people who were starting to ask and be invested in these kinds of questions.

We were fairly few and far between, but that work was trying to find the folks out there, primarily academics who were interested in this connection between technology and race and looked at technology from a critical race lens. We had the aim of trying to build that scholarly community and capacity to have greater influence both in the fields of research that we represent, but also beyond in terms of the work that is done in the technology sphere, in the public sector, in the private sector, at higher education institutions, and so forth.

I spent a lot of my time helping to build and shape that organization, which is headed toward some really great things, working with allied organizations to build a larger network on race and tech within and beyond the United States. Recently, this has been much more part of my focus: to get us together and build community.

Seven or eight years later, we are in the fortunate place where there are many types of centers and initiatives, including the Just Tech program, that have materialized doing great work. The question then becomes: How do we build the necessary connection amongst those allied organizations to do collectively even greater work?

Spending some time with folks across this landscape prompted me to think about what does this mean or might mean to have a race and tech network? How could that function? What would be the value of having an organization that serves the whole and helps build capacity that goes far beyond any one of our organizations or initiatives? That's where I've been spending a lot of my work, bringing in new folks from

a wide array of fields—computer scientists, critical race scholars, sociologists—and thinking broadly about how we can centralize questions of race and marginality in our broader discussions about tech policymaking?



CV: What reasons do we have to be optimistic in the tech space?

CM: Over the course of the last few years, having written *Black Software*, and spending a lot of time speaking to audiences of various kinds, I have come into contact and engaged with a lot of technologists of color, ones that are working at private companies or in their own entrepreneurial endeavors. I've seen their energy and optimism, which refuses to be shaped by old people's pessimism, and their willingness to entertain and understand the fact that technology has had some devastating consequences, but refuse to believe that it can't fundamentally be better and that they can't be part of that solution. That's been a reason for optimism.

Folks and people of color are working in the tech sector and have the aspirations to do what it's going to take to get things done. I'm motivated by those folks that are just busting it and hustling and trying to do great things with technology and get others to recognize them and invest in their dreams and what's going on. I think that's where I draw optimism from about the future, probably more than anything else.

CV: Charlton, I have one last question can you recommend the work of younger scholars who are doing new things and who we should be paying attention to at Just Tech?

CM: A lot of names come to mind. One of the things that's kept me going in this field building, network building work is the recognition that there are so many exciting folks in doctoral programs or postdocs right now who are already doing groundbreaking work and thinking about the future. That is exciting. It's probably one of the few things that gives me any sense of optimism about the future and there's a lot of exciting folks to be on the lookout for.

Among them, I would include Samuel So at the University of Washington, Natalie Araujo Melo at Northwestern, Jorge Garcia at Stanford, and Shamika Klassen at the University of Colorado Boulder. They're all current doctoral students working on their dissertations. Others I would include are C. Brandon Ogbunu at Yale, Rachel Atkins at St. John's University, Mark Diaz, and Eric Corbett, both of whom are presently at Google.