

Cut and Paste Reportage: The Rise of "Whatever Journalism"

My last post presented a case study of how print news reports on plagiarism in the university. In this post, I want to reverse the poles: a student paper publishes a letter to the editor; the letter is picked up by an online scandal aggregator and turned into a news story. And the story jumps from site to site, makes its way to *MSNBC* and from there jumps the Atlantic and appears in the *Daily Mail*.

- What can we learn about 21st century writing practices by following this process of translation and dissemination?
- What is the proper name for what happens during this process?

When students fail to cite, it is plagiarism. When news sites revise writing done by others, what is the best name for the activity? Distillation? Repackaging?

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So, it's Tuesday, December 13th, 2011.

It's the last day of classes for the the fall semester at Rutgers. Two reading days will follow and then exams run all the way up to the fringe of Christmas.

It's also the last day for the 2011 print edition of the student run paper, *The Daily Targum*.¹ In the Letter to the Editor section, a 1300-word piece signed by eleven graduate students appears under the headline:

English department fails to address racism

Given the timing, the letter doesn't create much buzz on campus. But that afternoon, Jezebel.com, a "general interest women's website" that is part of Gawker media, picks up the story and gives it a newer, snappier headline, juxtaposed with an image that is likely to strike most viewers as incongruous, at least initially:

JEZEBEL TOP STORIES

RACISM

Rutgers Student Proposes Whites-Only Screening Of Racist Movie [Updated]

BY ANNA NORTH • DEC 13, 2011 4:45 PM

Share Like 1k 45,948 254

Screenshot taken of Jezebel.com on 1/10/12

This combination of title and image attracts quite a few hits, some by users who then use various forms of social media (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit) to draw others to the article. Within 24 hours, the *Jezebel* article receives over 30,000 views.

On Wednesday, December 14th, the *Huffington Post* runs the story with a tamer headline and a more striking image:

'Song Of The South' Proposed Showing By Rutgers Student Prompts Demand For Apology



First Posted: 12/14/11 04:27 PM ET ; Updated: 12/16/11 05:22 PM ET

Screenshot taken of the Huffington Post on 1/10/12

Framed as a story about the screening of Disney's *Song of the South*, the issue doesn't draw anything like the attention it attracted at Jezebel: only twenty comments follow the headline's lead and most discuss the film's availability, rather than the context for its screening.

On Friday afternoon, December 16th, msnbc.com posts its version of the events at Rutgers, without images, under this headline:



'Racist' email for whites-only movie viewing riles Rutgers students, staff

Screenshot taken of msnbc.com on 1/10/12

This seems to be the most successful way to spin the piece.

Over the next month, the *msnbc* article generates more than 1500 comments, gets tweeted over a 100 times, and shared via other social media over 700 times.

On Saturday, December 17th, the story crosses the Atlantic, appearing in the online version of the *Daily Mail* under the heading:

Outrage over Rutgers University email for 'whites only' movie screening

By DAILY MAIL REPORTER

Last updated at 7:03 AM on 17th December 2011

Comments (8) | Share +1 0 | Tweet 4 | Like

The English Department at Rutgers University has denied being lax in its response to an email sent by a graduate student inviting a group of students to a whites-only screening of the movie *Song Of The South*.

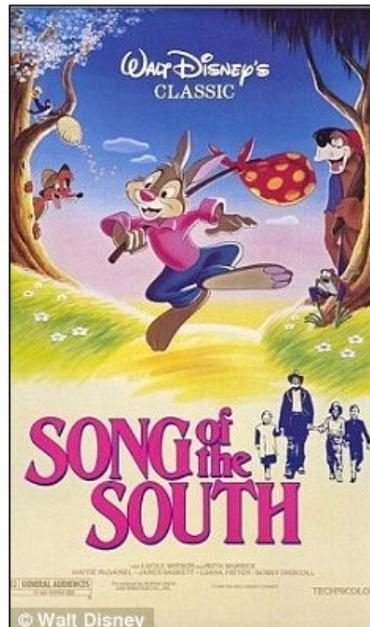
Carolyn Williams, chairman of the department, said allegations in a letter to the student newspaper that department officials had refused to publicly acknowledge 'the racist, discriminatory nature of the email' are false.

She added that the department 'finds bias acts unacceptable,' *msnbc.com* reports.

The furore over the email emerged earlier this week when the student newspaper *The Daily Targum* reported the story.

It was sent on September 28 by a white student to a group of students enrolled with her in a class titled 'Post-Bellum/Pre-Harlem.'

She invited them to see the 1946



Attacked: The 1946 movie has been slammed by some for its portrayal of blacks

Screenshot taken of Daily Mail on 1/10/12

And there, it seems, at the feet of the *Daily Mail* online readership, the story finally comes to a stop, having generated only eight comments and four tweets total by the readers of the British scandal rag over the month following the publication of the original letter to the editor in the student newspaper on the other side of the ocean.

When I recounted the viral spread of this story and then its denouement to a colleague recently, he asked, "How did an email that went to five students become an international 'outrage'?"

It's a good question.

And it remains one even after we stipulate that the international outrage is a fiction.

The story certainly generated outrage locally: the original letter to the editor on December 13th makes that unambiguously clear. But why did this local dustup travel so well, flourish, and then die off, all in the space of five days?

To answer these questions, we need to return to December 13th and systematically work our way down the timeline, following the digital footprints, as it were. And, as we follow the story on its way, we'll learn something about 21st century writing practices and what it means to write effectively in the short form news report.

*

In the original letter to the editor of *The Daily Targum*, the eleven signatories wrote to make their anger and outrage about what they saw as a lack response by the English faculty to the presence of racism in its midst. The triggering event for the signatories was an email that went to some, but not all, of the graduate students enrolled in a course on Antebellum literature offered that fall by the English department. They provide the following account of the email:

In a graduate class dedicated to writings on race between the Civil War and the Harlem Renaissance, an email was sent by a white doctoral student — an instructor within the department — to the students in class whom she perceived as white. This email invited “her fellow non-racist racists” to a private, guilt-free viewing of 1946 musical “Song of the South” in her home, where together they could engage in celebratory mocking of stereotyped 1940’s images of southern blacks. This was an event hosted by a “ragtime/minstrel loving fool” who was due “for some rollicking Disneyfied Ole Darkeyism.” The postscript read, “If you do come, hooch is most welcome, as are strawhats and other Darkeyisms. I might even buy a watermillyum if I get enough interest.” It specified who invited guests should bring, given that “I might yell racist things at the TV.” The author of this email articulated the hope that the experience would be a “communion with her shamefully preferred era of Disney.”

How did this hair-raising email come to light, you are no doubt wondering.

Well, you might be wondering this.

None of the writers who subsequently "report" on the event do, however.

And the signatories, for whatever reason, don't say. They only observe that the sender of the invitation included in her recipient list students "whom she perceived as white."

However the email came to the signatories' attention, what has most offended them is what happened after the email went out--or more appropriately, what didn't happen, as they see it. Some recipients of the email responded with enthusiasm to the invitation, others remained silent. And when the matter was brought to the department's attention, the signatories charge that the only official response took the form of "a panel discussion on race organized not by the English department, but by the students who were the victims of the email in the first place." Having criticized the English faculty for their "muted" response to the offensive email, the signatories close with a call for the university as a whole to contend with "the racially-based hostility that still exists within the University"

Beneath the letter, one finds the names of the eleven signatories and a correction, added sometime later, that makes it clear the signatories are not themselves graduate students in English. Ten are graduates students in various parts of the Graduate School of Education and one of them is in the Urban Studies program in Newark. And while it is not made clear whether any of the students was enrolled in the English graduate course where the offensive email emerged, the correction establishes that all of the signatories were enrolled in same fall course, "Race, Ethnicity, and Inequality in Education," offered by the Graduate School of Education.

*

Now, before going further, a host of disclosures and disclaimers:

As a member of the Rutgers English department, I have my own feelings about the decision of the *Targum's* editorial board to run this letter without seeking independent confirmation of the version of events the signatories provide. But, that genie is already out of the bottle; I have no interest in pretending that it can be put back in. It's a well-written letter. It gives voice to a genuine sense of hurt and injustice. It is written by students at Rutgers. And, as the chain of headlines cited above show, it's certainly newsworthy. And it will certainly generate conversations locally that are important.

Now, though I have virtually no first-hand knowledge about how the case of the offensive email was handled internally, I feel it important to acknowledge that the offensive email quoted in the letter of protest did eventually make its way to me in unedited form, as did a host of follow-up emails. This, in fact, is how I first learned of the emails. But I won't be quoting from or drawing on those emails in what follows nor will I be trying to prove or disprove the signatories' central claims about the department's response to the emails. Straightening such matters out locally belongs, properly, to those who were directly involved in the incident.²

As text2cloud, I write not as an interested departmental member nor as an investigative reporter trying to pin down who sent what to whom and why nor as someone invested in preserving the profession to which I belong. Rather, the approach I take in what follows will be consistent with the approach I've taken throughout all the other entries on text2cloud: to wit, I

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work only with information that is available publicly to anyone willing to look and I use interpretive tools that are freely available to anyone interested in giving them a try.

The signatories' letter to the *Targum* is one such piece of public information.

I wouldn't bother writing about this letter, though, if it hadn't been "seen" by the search engines and flagged by the editors at Jezebel.com, thereby making the local matter fodder for a national readership. It is this transition that interests me: what acts of writing and what venues of dissemination make the local of general interest.

*

The letter to the editor was posted to the online version of the *Targum* in the early morning hours of Tuesday, December 13th (at the stroke of midnight, when Monday ended and Tuesday began, to be exact).

At 4:45, Jezebel.com ran its 450+ word version of what happened at Rutgers. The post is by Anna North, who is either an intern, an editor, or a staff writer at *Jezebel* (the url for her profile specifies "intern"; her profile specifies that she's an "editor"; and her website says she's a staff writer.) North earned her MFA in 2009 at Iowa, has published in *Atlantic Monthly*, and published her first novel, *American Pacifica* in May 2011. When asked in an interview about the research she did to aid her in constructing the dystopian world of the near future depicted in her novel, North had this to say:

I actually did relatively little research for *America Pacifica*. In some cases I drew from experience -- moving to Iowa after living in Los Angeles can be sort of like going through an Ice Age. In a few cases I had to make changes to make things more plausible -- for instance, I initially had the islanders eating a lot of krill, but a teacher told me krill were very fragile and would probably be one of the first organisms to go in any kind of environmental disaster. So I switched to jellyfish.

In shrinking the signatories' letter to the editor by two-thirds, Ms. North did not dispense entirely with research, though. Before re-posting the heavily redacted version of the original account, she paused to look up what the *Song of the South* was about and what the NAACP thought of the film (hint: not much). And then all that was left was crafting an opening line that would hook her readers:

Recently, students in the Rutgers University English Dept. received an exceedingly crap email, inviting them to a screening of a racist Disney movie, where "Darkeyisms" and "watermillyum" were on offer.

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Um, "exceedingly crap email"? Is that a term of art?

Whatever.

On to the summarizing, the boiling down, the killer quote, and then the this stirring peroration:

We've reached out to the English Dept. to see if they plan to respond, ~~but so far we haven't received an answer.~~ Hopefully an official response is forthcoming. ~~The offensive email went out to students in a class about the very problems the email exemplified.~~ Students learning about racial inequalities in education deserve to have racial inequalities in *their* education — under which category a whites-only screening of a racist film, even if not an official class assignment, indisputably falls — addressed promptly and directly. It might be too late for the former, but the department still has the chance to do the latter. [Strikeouts in original]

Well, the prose, as emended over time, has lost a lot of its steam, but you get the gist of what Ms. North was reaching for: it's a bit of the old "I've just read something that has outraged me, so I'm here to shake my fist and make my displeasure known." It's the kind of writing, actually, that one is more used seeing in a letter to the editor or in an online comment section *below* a news article.

*

If you were a journalist and you really felt this story was newsworthy, wouldn't you want to do more than look up how the NAACP responded to *Song of the South*? Wouldn't you go so far as to pick up the phone and call down to Jersey to see if you could get a sense of the context surrounding the original letter to the editor?

The strikeouts in the article, as it now appears on Jezebel, attest to just how little fact-checking Ms. North did while redacting the original letter to the editor: she's wrong about what course the signatories were taking; who received the original email (she never bothers to ask how many received the email initially); and about what the students were studying in either class.

And then, in addition to all the strikeouts, there's this appended to the bottom of the article/summary/redaction of the signatories' letter to the editor:

Update: The Rutgers English Dept. says they actually did respond to the racist email, and has now sent us a copy of their [response](#). They also say that the offensive movie was never actually screened. Students from the class have yet to comment to us on the email or its aftermath.

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Oops.

Whatever.

Despite this update, these sentences remain untouched about the update in Ms. North's article:

We've reached out to the English Dept. to see if they plan to respond [...] . . . Hopefully an official response is forthcoming.

45,000 views.

Why would you take an article down or revise it to reflect the fact that there are conflicting versions of what happened when the article continues to attract traffic as is?

This puts a whole new spin on the saying that, "There's no such thing as bad press."

*

Before we follow the story from *Jezebel* to the *Huffington Post*, here's another way to look at what happens when news reporting is reduced to repackaging and editorializing over the surface of information found elsewhere on the Web.

Inspired by Turnitin.com, I took the original letter to the editor and, using a free program called "Doc Cop," I compared the original to the piece Ms. North posted to *Jezebel* to see just how much overlap there was between the two. The Doc Cop program is not nearly as sophisticated as the program Turnitin.com uses: at best it finds matches of eight consecutive words or more.

Even so, Doc Cop is good enough to give us a rough visual of how much of Ms. North's post is taken *directly* from the signatories' letter to the editor.

DOC Cop Report Generated: 11-Jan-2012 at 1:14:27 PM (UTC+11:00)

| Case | File | Correlation | File |
|--------|--------------|-------------|---------------|
| 1 of 1 | jezebel.docx | 25% | original.docx |

hosted by a ragtime minstrel loving fool who was due for some rollicking disneyfied ole darkyeism the postscript read **IF YOU DO COME HOCH IS MOST WELCOME AS ARE STRAWHATS AND OTHER DARKEYISMS I MIGHT EVEN BUY A WATERMILLUM IF I GET ENOUGH INTEREST** I specified who invited guests should bring given that **I MIGHT YELL RACIST THINGS AT THE TV** the author of this email articulated the hope that the experience would be a communion with her shamefully preferred era of disney one would hope that for those who harbored a sentimental love of old disney films a critical viewing of song of the south in a graduatelevel classroom might prompt feelings of reflection discomfort reevaluation change that it might engender a deeper examination of the ways ideology and its companion brutality have been used to deprive blacks of power privilege and assets throughout our history as a nation instead this student chose to send an insulting damaging and racially offensive email inviting half the class to a whitesonly party celebrating song of the south that some other white students in the class voiced enthusiasm about the party is disturbing painful and indicative of the larger presence of ignorance and discrimination students of color must endure in higher education that the other students receiving the invite remained silent must have been equally horrifying silence in the face of overt racism could mean anything discomfort acquiescence complete agreement but beyond its intended meaning silence represents a terrifying complaisance when the environment is changed to one of threat and danger to students of color at best this silence demonstrates a failure on the part of the university to prepare students to recognize and challenge discrimination and injustice

THIS RACIST EMAIL AND THE OTHER STUDENTS REACTIONS TO IT INCLUDING THEIR SILENCE HAVE NOW SHAPED THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN THEIR CLASSROOM IN MUCH THE SAME WAY AS THE DEPARTMENT S FAILURE TO ACT APPROPRIATELY HAS SHAPED THE ENVIRONMENT BEYOND THE CLASSROOM A FEW PROFESSORS SCOLDED THE WRITER HOWEVER NO ONE IN THE DEPARTMENT PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGED THE RACIST DISCRIMINATORY NATURE OF THE EMAIL THIS WAS A MOMENT WHEN FACULTY COULD HAVE MADE CLEAR THE SERIOUSNESS WITH WHICH THEY REGARD THE CRITICAL TOPICS THEY DISCUSS IN THE COURSES THEY TEACH A MEANINGFUL AND IMPORTANT DISCUSSION COULD HAVE TAKEN PLACE THAT MAY HAVE CHANGED OR ENGAGED PEOPLE INSTEAD AN UNCOMFORTABLE TOPIC WAS LARGELY AVOIDED AND THE FEELINGS OF THE STUDENT WHO SENT THE EMAIL WERE PRIORITIZED ABOVE THE PAIN OF STUDENTS OF COLOR BREEDING RESENTMENT AND MISINFORMATION ABOUT WHAT WAS WRONG WITH THE EMAIL IN THE FIRST PLACE

we reached out to the english dept to see if they plan to respond but so far we haven t received an answer hopefully an official response is forthcoming the offensive email went out to students in a class about the very problems the email exmofilled students learning about racial

DOC Cop (<http://www.doccop.com>)

Click image to enlarge.

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Comparing Jezebel.com's version of the events to the signatories' letter to the editor: a 25% match (~112 words)

The 25% match is a deceptive figure, though: that just means that a quarter of the piece posted by North is *directly quoted* from the signatories' letter to the editor. This doesn't reflect how much of Ms. North's piece is indebted to the original letter.

So, to provide a clearer representation of how much of Ms. North's piece either summarizes, quotes directly, or presents erroneous information, I offer my own color-coded version:

Recently, students in the Rutgers University English Dept. received an exceedingly crap email, inviting them to a screening of a racist Disney movie, where "Darkeyisms" and "watermillyum" were on offer. Now some students, understandably, would like an apology.

According to an editorial by graduate student Elizabeth Braxton (and her fellow students in a course titled "Race, Ethnicity and Inequality in Education") in the *Daily Targum*, a white PhD student sent the email to some of her classmates in a course titled "Post-Bellum/Pre-Harlem" "Race, Ethnicity and Inequality in Education" – specifically, the white ones. She invited "her fellow non-racist racists" to a screening of "Song of the South," a 1946 movie that tells the stories of Br'er Rabbit and the Tar Baby and, according to the NAACP, gives the impression "of an idyllic master-slave relationship." The email added, "If you do come, hooch is most welcome, as are strawhats and other Darkeyisms. I might even buy a watermillyum if I get enough interest." She also noted that guests should be careful whom they brought, because "I might yell racist things at the TV."

Unsurprisingly, when word got out about the email, many students were upset. What's even more disturbing, according to Braxton, is that the email's initial recipients didn't step up to take the sender to task, and the department never issued a formal response. She writes,

This racist email, and the other students' reactions to it – including their silence – have now shaped the learning environment in their classroom, in much the same way as the department's failure to act appropriately has shaped the environment beyond the classroom. A few professors scolded the writer. However, no one in the department publicly acknowledged the racist, discriminatory nature of the email. This was a moment when faculty could have made clear the seriousness with which they regard the critical topics they discuss in the courses they teach. A meaningful and important discussion could have taken place that may have changed or

engaged people. Instead, an uncomfortable topic was largely avoided, and the feelings of the student who sent the email were prioritized above the pain of students of color, breeding resentment and misinformation about what was wrong with the email in the first place.

We've reached out to the English Dept. to see if they plan to respond, but so far we haven't received an answer. Hopefully an official response is forthcoming. The offensive email went out to students in a class about the very problems the email exemplified. Students learning about racial inequalities in education deserve to have racial inequalities in *their* education – under which category a whites-only screening of a racist film, even if not an official class assignment, indisputably falls – addressed promptly and directly. It might be too late for the former, but the department still has the chance to do the latter.

Click image to enlarge.

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Summary (blue), direct quotes (yellow), and erroneous information (red)

By my count, 110 words out of the original 450+ that Ms. North supplied can be considered her own. That's a little less than 25% of the entire piece. Only 28 of those words present new information not contained in the original letter. (That's a little more than 5% of the total.)

Here are those words, in all their value-addedness:

... [Song of the South], a 1946 movie that tells the stories of Br'er Rabbit and the Tar Baby and, according to the NAACP, gives the impression "of an idyllic master-slave relationship."

*

Twenty-four hours after the *Jezebel* piece first appeared, the *Huffington Post* ran its--appropriately author-less--version. Running the Huff piece through Doc Cop generates a 27% direct overlap with the signatories' original letter. More of an overlap, in other words, than the *Jezebel* piece!

It's more instructive, though, to consider the *Jezebel* piece next to the Huff piece:

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Recently, students in the Rutgers University English Dept. received an exceedingly crap email, inviting them to a screening of a racist Disney movie, where "Darkeyisms" and "watermillium" were on offer. Now some students, understandably, would like an apology.</p> <p>According to an editorial by graduate student Elizabeth Braxton (and her fellow students in a course titled "Race, Ethnicity and Inequality in Education") in the <i>Daily Targum</i>, a white PhD student sent the email to some of her classmates in a course titled "Post-Bellum/Pre-Harlem" "Race, Ethnicity and Inequality in Education" -- specifically, the white ones. She invited "her fellow non-racist racists" to a screening of "Song of the South," a 1946 movie that tells the stories of Br'er Rabbit and the Tar Baby and, according to the NAACP, gives the impression "of an idyllic master-slave relationship." The email added, "If you do come, hooch is most welcome, as are strawhats and other Darkeyisms. I might even buy a watermillium if I get enough interest." She also noted that guests should be careful whom they brought, because "I might yell racist things at the TV."</p> <p>Unsurprisingly, when word got out about the email, many students were upset. What's even more disturbing, according to Braxton, is that the email's initial recipients didn't step up to take the sender to task, and the department never issued a formal apology. She writes,</p> <p>This racist email, and the other students' reactions to it -- including their silence -- have now shaped the learning environment in their classroom, in much the same way as the department's failure to act appropriately has shaped the environment beyond the classroom. A few professors scolded the writer. However, no one in the department publicly acknowledged the racist, discriminatory nature of the email. This was a moment when faculty could have made clear the seriousness with which they regard the critical topics they discuss in the courses they teach. A meaningful and important discussion could have taken place that may have changed or engaged people. Instead, an uncomfortable topic was largely avoided, and the feelings of the student who sent the email were prioritized above the pain of students of color, breeding resentment and misinformation about what was wrong with the email in the first place.</p> <p>We've reached out to the English Dept. to see if they plan to respond, but so far we haven't received an answer. Hopefully an official response is forthcoming. The offensive email went out to students in a class about the very problems the email exemplified. Students learning about racial inequalities in education deserve to have racial inequalities in their education -- under which category a whites-only screening of a racist film, even if not an official class assignment, indisputably falls -- addressed promptly and directly. It might be too late for the former, but the department still has the chance to do the latter.</p> | <p>Graduate students at Rutgers University in New Jersey are asking officials to step in after a student there invited peers to a screening of a movie with racist imagery, <i>Jezebel</i> reports.</p> <p>Members of the "Race, Ethnicity and Inequality in Education," class at Rutgers's Graduate School of Education sent a letter after students in the "Post-Bellum/Pre-Harlem" class received an email from a student hosting a viewing party of "Song of the South," the 1946 movie produced by Walt Disney that has been criticized for its portrayal of blacks during the Reconstruction Era. It was the student's message and not the movie, however, that some found offensive.</p> <p>According to a student letter published in <i>The Daily Targum</i>, the school's newspaper, the student invited "her fellow non-racist racists" to a private, guilt-free screening of the film in her home. She characterized herself as a "ragtime/mistrel loving fool," and encouraged recipients to bring spirits, saying "If you do come, hooch is most welcome, as are strawhats and other Darkeyisms. I might even buy a watermillium if I get enough interest." She also advised guests to be aware of bringing friends, along because "[she] might yell racist things at the TV."</p> <p>The letter to the newspaper expressed concern at the recipients' reaction, which included students who both remained silent and voiced enthusiasm, stating that the email and their behavior strayed from the original purpose of viewing the film.</p> <p>"One would hope that, for those who harbored a sentimental love of old Disney films, a critical viewing of "Song of the South" in a graduate-level classroom might prompt feelings of reflection, discomfort, re-evaluation, change; that it might engender a deeper examination of the ways ideology--and its companion, brutality--have been used to deprive blacks of power, privilege and assets throughout our history as a nation. Instead, this student chose to send an insulting, damaging and racially offensive email inviting half the class to a whites-only party celebrating "Song of the South." That some other white students in the class voiced enthusiasm about the party is, disturbing, painful and indicative of the larger presence of ignorance and discrimination students of color must endure in higher education. That the other students receiving the invite remained silent must have been equally horrifying."</p> <p>But students were further angered that the university and the English department has not issued an apology or publicly addressed the incident. According to the letter, thus far, there has been a student-hosted panel discussion on race and "a few professors scolded the writer." However, students want action from the university.</p> <p>"Late is better than never," the letter read. "It would be heartening to see concrete actions taken by the department in order to educate and reconcile those involved in this specific incident."</p> |
|--|---|

Click image to enlarge.

Jezebel.com versus Huffington Post: Doc Cop finds a 6% match.

Side-by-side, the eye immediately sees what Doc Cop, searching for strings cannot: the striking similarity between the organization of the two derivative pieces. Indeed, in the lead paragraph to the *Huffington Post* piece, the anonymous writer immediately acknowledges *Jezebel* as the source. In other words, the *Huffington Post* is reporting that *Jezebel* has reported on the untoward goings-on at Rutgers. That's the news.

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But the Huff Post writer does more than tidy up Ms. North's stricken prose (no "extreme crap email" for the Huff Post crowd):

- He or she drops the NAACP reaction to *Song of the South* in favor on an explanation gleaned about the film from Snopes.com, a site devoted to folklore and urban legends--to wit, "the 1946 movie produced by Walt Disney that has been criticized for its portrayal of blacks during the Reconstruction Era." (For those keeping score, that's swapping 20 words for 28.)
- While both pieces use the same quote from the emailed invitation, the Huff Post writer grabs a different lengthy paragraph from the signatories' letter to the editor to better capture the sense of hurt caused by this planned get-together. (Fourth paragraph on the left versus fifth paragraph on the right: they are virtually immediately opposite one another in the side-by-side comparison.)
- The Huff Post writer turns over the conclusion to the signatories, citing their statement that action by the department and the university is welcome because "[l]ate is better than never." In the process, the Huff Post writer inadvertently reveals that Ms. North's fist shaking conclusion is, in fact, an unacknowledged gloss of the conclusion to the signatories' letter to the editor. (Even her outrage is borrowed.)

In sum, the Huff Post piece is a better written version of the *Jezebel* piece, but it is still, in the first analysis and the final analysis and all the analyses that fall in between, simply a redaction of the signatories' letter to the editor. Nothing that comes to mind when one conjures the act of reporting is to be found in either piece.

And, though the sentences are better, the Huff Post piece fails to convey the fact that the controversy is not about screening the *Song of the South* but rather about hosting a whites-only screening for an audience bedecked as "darkies."

Just how far off is the Huff Post on this?

At the end of the article, after an update posted at 11:17PM on September 14th, the Huff Post offers this "quick poll":

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Here's a clip from "Song of the South." Do you think it's racist?



Quick Poll

Is "Song of the South" a racist movie?

- Yes! It's a negative portrayal of blacks in the Reconstruction Era.
- No! It's an innocent cartoon.

VOTE

Yes? No? You make the call!

There's no other way to put it: this "interactive" hook is breathtakingly stupid.

Why?

Because however one "votes" in the quick poll, the outcome is irrelevant to the story that precedes it.

How irrelevant? When I voted on 1/11/12, I was informed that it's essentially a coin flip:

Quick Poll

Is "Song of the South" a racist movie?

| | | |
|---|------------------------------------|--------|
| Yes! It's a negative portrayal of blacks in the Reconstruction Era. | <div style="width: 52.46%;"></div> | 52.46% |
| No! It's an innocent cartoon. | <div style="width: 47.54%;"></div> | 47.54% |

What, exactly, follows from this information? If you voted "innocent cartoon," does this mean attending a whites only screening, appared in "darkeyisms," is also innocent fun?

Whatever.

*

In the hours after the *Jezebel* article first appeared and for the next 48 hours, Greg Trevor,

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by rem - <http://text2cloud.com/2012/01/cut-and-paste-reportage-the-rise-of-whatever-journalism/>

Director of Media Relations at Rutgers, and Carolyn Williams, chair of Rutgers English, work to try to correct all the errors in Ms. North's piece, but the *Jezebel* piece has spawned so many repostings via Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit that there's no way to keep up.

Why?

Because a story about a WHITES ONLY SCREENING has legs.

And because a correction that makes it clear that the screening never happened ruins all the fun, since it means that everyone writing in to voice their outrage, in whatever direction, (YES! IT IS A RACIST MOVIE! NO, IT'S JUST ENTERTAINMENT!), is getting bent out of shape about an email that one student sent to a handful of other students inviting them to an event that never occurred.

To keep the outrage flowing, Jezebel, as we've seen, just strikes out the inaccuracies. And the Huff Post? It just adds quotes from correspondence it has received from Professor Williams below its article, without changing the title of its original piece or its substance, even though the quote from Professor Williams contradicts the central claims in the signatories' letter to the editor:

Most important, it is not true that we "failed to address racism," as the title and substance of the Targum article claims. The offending email was written on September 28. On September 29, our Director of Graduate Studies was informed, and on September 30 she wrote to the author of the email. On that same day (September 30), the author of the offending email apologized to her fellow students and to the Director of Graduate Studies. The party certainly did not take place. On October 10, the author of the email apologized to the entire class.

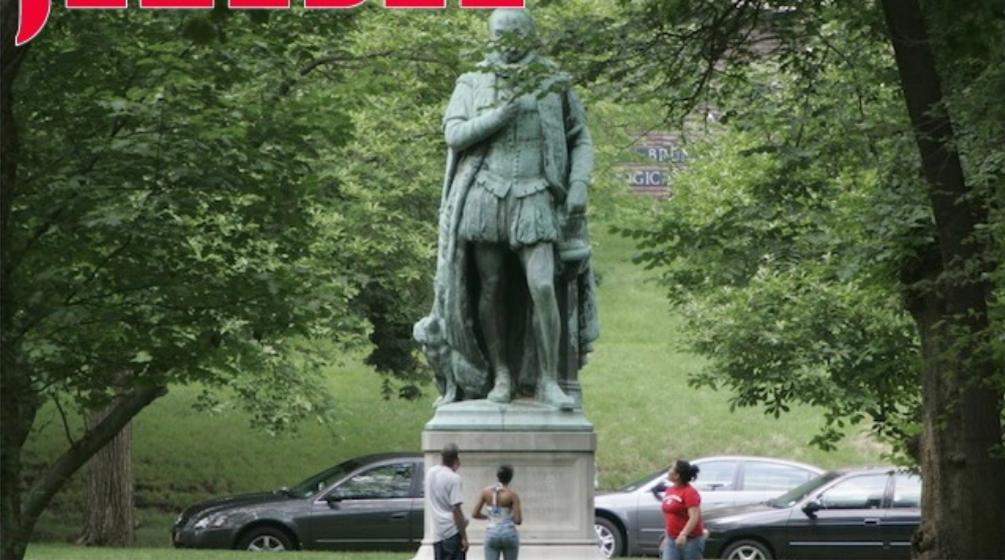
The best way to describe the way Jezebel and the Huff Post have handled these conflicting accounts of how the department responded to the offending email?

Whatever Journalism.

*

A few hours before the Huff Post piece appeared, Jezebel posted what in the olden days would've been called a "retraction" except that, as noted above, it didn't pull down its original article about the whites-only screening. Instead, Ms. North tapped out the other side of the story and posted it as a separate article:

JEZEBEL TOP STORIES



RACISM

Rutgers English Dept. Responds To Racist Email [Updated]

BY ANNA NORTH • DEC 14, 2011 1:25 PM

Share +1 Like 73 26,728 132

Um, nice image.

The chosen headline, "Rutgers English Dept. Responds to Racist Email," seems to have the power to douse the fire that Jezebel itself set. But, instead of making the story of the whites only screening go away, the response by the department can only lag the original story, while simultaneously propelling the other story forward. Why do I say this? The ratio of readers of the original, erroneous article to readers of the departmental statement is 2:1, so the best case scenario is that half the readers of the original article--the one that applies the digital tattoo--read the correction.

*

Following the spread of the story to the *Huffington Post*, for close to 48 hours it seemed like the efforts of the chair and the university's Media Relations group had succeeded in containing the damage created by *Jezebel's* publication of an unsubstantiated account of the consequences of a single student's email to a handful of her classmates.

And then the gorilla *msnbc* weighed in.

James Eng, a senior editor at *MSNBC*, gets the byline for the piece headlined, "Racist' email for whites-only screening riles Rutgers students, staff." Why is "racist" in quotes? Why does the list of people riled by the (non-)screening not include faculty?

Cut and Paste Reportage: The Rise of "What..."

by rem - <http://text2cloud.com/2012/01/cut-and-paste-reportage-the-rise-of-whatever-journalism/>

These implicit questions aren't answered in Mr. Eng's piece, but his 800+ word article is a world away from the redactions that appeared in *Jezebel* and the *Huffington Post*. He doesn't treat the letter to the editor and the departmental response serially: he synthesizes the two. Furthermore, he seeks additional comments from one of the signatories and from Professor Williams. He carries out the basic activities one associates with the work of being a journalist.

If we use Doc Cop to run Mr. Eng's article against the signatories' letter to the editor and Professor Williams' response, we learn that there is an 18% overlap:

| DOC Cop Report | | Generated: 12-Jan-2012 at 2:05:20 PM (UTC+11:00) | |
|---|------------|--|-----------------------------|
| Case | File | Correlation | File |
| 1 of 1 | msnbc.docx | 18% | original with response.docx |
| email read in part according to the targum the email also noted that guests should be careful whom they brought because i might yell racist things at the tv elizabeth braxton another graduate student in english said she was upset when she found out about the email in a letter to the student newspaper braxton and fellow students in a race ethnicity and inequality in education class complained THIS RACIST EMAIL AND THE OTHER STUDENTS REACTIONS TO IT INCLUDING THEIR SILENCE HAVE NOW SHAPED THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN THEIR CLASSROOM IN MUCH THE SAME WAY AS THE DEPARTMENT S FAILURE TO ACT APPROPRIATELY HAS SHAPED THE ENVIRONMENT BEYOND THE CLASSROOM A FEW PROFESSORS SCOLDED THE WRITER HOWEVER NO ONE IN THE DEPARTMENT publicly ACKNOWLEDGED THE RACIST DISCRIMINATORY NATURE OF THE EMAIL THIS WAS A MOMENT WHEN FACULTY COULD HAVE MADE CLEAR THE SERIOUSNESS WITH WHICH THEY REGARD THE CRITICAL TOPICS THEY DISCUSS IN THE COURSES THEY TEACH A MEANINGFUL AND IMPORTANT DISCUSSION COULD HAVE TAKEN PLACE THAT MAY HAVE CHANGED OR ENGAGED PEOPLE INSTEAD AN UNCOMFORTABLE TOPIC WAS LARGELY AVOIDED AND THE FEELINGS OF THE STUDENT WHO SENT THE EMAIL WERE PRIORITIZED ABOVE THE PAIN OF STUDENTS OF COLOR BREEDING RESENTMENT AND MISINFORMATION ABOUT WHAT WAS WRONG WITH THE EMAIL IN THE FIRST PLACE braxton said friday she and her classmates stand by the letter but declined further comment | | intellectual dialogue surrounding the very issues that have kept us from recognizing one another as human beings we are surrounded by an abundance of resources historians political scientists activists change agents inquisitive and passionate students and future leaders we urge the university community to ensure that the silenced voices be heard and for us to look deeply into what has occurred as socrates said an unexamined life is not worth living and it is necessary that issues of racism classism or any ism for that matter undergo serious critical examination we often focus on the intention behind incidents that occur and although it may provide context it does not change the outcome or the impact on the community the recent incident brings to light the racially based hostility that still exists within the university and suggests the need for the university to take a more proactive role in engaging our entire university in building a space in which racism is directly addressed in an email sent to the university community on dec university president richard l mcormick issued a statement reaffirming the university s policy prohibiting discrimination and harassment the memo stated rutgers plays an important role in shaping new jersey s future by contributing exceptional leaders research and new ideas to realize our vision for the future we are committed to providing a supportive and collaborative social environment and a community dedicated to respecting and valuing diversity the elimination of discrimination and harassment is one necessary step toward a more hospitable environment in which the open exchange of ideas is encouraged and members of all groups feel welcome acts of racism have no place in our university community and we want to take this opportunity to publicly condemn the sending of these emails to urge engagement in difficult conversations and attention to issues of justice and to make clear our expectations that the university will uphold its moral and legal responsibility to ensure a safe nondiscriminatory learning environment on campus the letter to the editor printed in the daily targum on dec english department fails to address racism is not accurate and in our opinion is irresponsible as far as we know none of the authors of the letter reached out to ask any of us how or whether we had responded to the bias incident that happened in our department | |
| williams in an email friday to msnbc com disputed the assertion that department and university officials were lax in responding the screening never took place and the sender apologized within a few days of the incident to the students she sent it to and to the director of graduate studies williams said she then apologized again to her whole class in early october williams said at that time her apology was accepted nevertheless the original email and waves of responses to it have of course continued to be hurtful williams said in a response letter sent this week to the targum williams and rebecca walkowitz acting director of graduate studies wrote IN FACT WE RESPONDED IMMEDIATELY WITH SEVERITY AND DIRECTNESS IT COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MISUNDERSTOOD WHAT WE THOUGHT ABOUT THE OFFENDING EMAIL williams would not say friday whether the author of the email could face discipline citing privacy rules the incident led to faculty student meetings and a civility forum held dec and a committee will begin work early next year on a policy addressing bias the learnings are huge for all of us and they will continue in the spring semester | | IN FACT WE RESPONDED IMMEDIATELY WITH SEVERITY AND DIRECTNESS IT COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MISUNDERSTOOD WHAT WE THOUGHT ABOUT THE OFFENDING EMAIL the director of graduate studies was in touch with the author of the email within two days of its having been written to condemn the email and to require the author to retract the email and apologize for it the author of the offending email apologized to her fellow students in writing and in person before the entire class and her apology was accepted the party certainly did not take place many meetings then ensued between faculty and students faculty and faculty | |

Click image to enlarge.

MSNBC.com vs the originals: 18% overlap (~132 words)

So, what happens in the remaining 82% of Mr. Eng's article?

Well, let's consider how Mr. Eng introduces information about *Song of the South*. The writers from *Jezebel* and the *Huffington Post* identified their sources for this information. Mr. Eng forgoes this formality when he offers this summary of the film and its reception:

... some modern-day observers say [*Song of the South*] is racist and stereotypical in its portrayal of blacks just after the Civil War.

The film, a blend of live action and animation, is based on the fictional African-American character Uncle Remus created in the 1800s by author Joel Chandler Harris. In the movie, Uncle Remus regales a young boy who runs away from home with a series of delightful fables.

Cut and Paste Reportage: The Rise of "What..."

by rem - <http://text2cloud.com/2012/01/cut-and-paste-reportage-the-rise-of-whatever-journalism/>

There's a tension, isn't there, between the qualification that "some modern-day observers" see the film as racist and the description of the movie as involving the telling of "a series of delightful fables"?

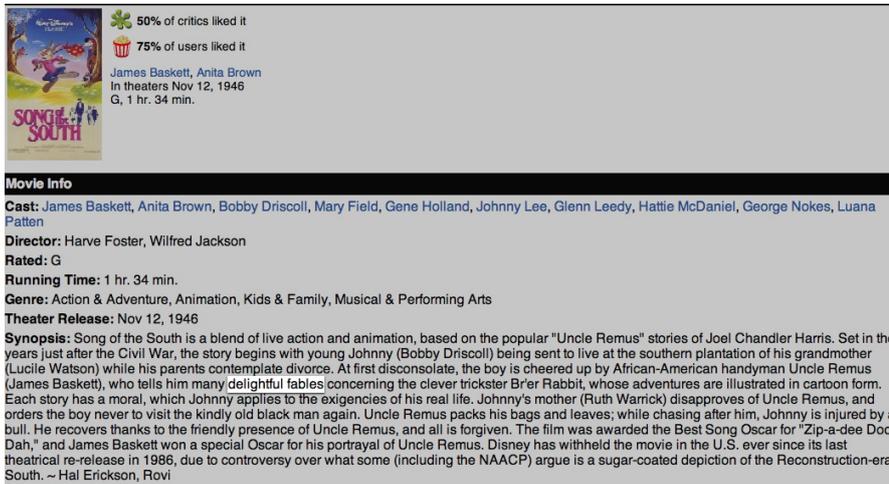
If you put your ear next to the text, do you hear a hollow sound? Who are these "modern-day observers"? Can you name, say, two who describe the film as "racist *and* stereotypical"? One?

I'm not suggesting that there are no such people; I'm wondering why Mr. Eng gives us no sources at this moment.

I think our reporter hasn't seen the film in question, so he's hedging on both sides of the argument (thus the decision to place "racist" in quotes in the headline). Some say the movie is racist; others find it a series of delightful fables. That's fair and balanced, right? Who could argue that this *isn't* true?

Just for fun, though, let's see what happens if we fire the movie title and that oddly discordant phrase, "delightful fables," into Google. Just to see if we can find who might be Mr. Eng's source for summarizing the film's content.

I'd say that, more likely than not, Mr. Eng's grabbed his summary from the crowd-sourced movie review site, Rotten Tomatoes.com. Read the following summary of *Song of the South* and see if you agree:



The image shows a screenshot of the Rotten Tomatoes page for the movie "Song of the South". At the top, there is a green tomato icon with "50% of critics liked it" and a red tomato icon with "75% of users liked it". Below this, the title "SONG OF THE SOUTH" is displayed in a stylized font. The cast list includes James Baskett, Anita Brown, Bobby Driscoll, Mary Field, Gene Holland, Johnny Lee, Glenn Leedy, Hattie McDaniel, George Nokes, and Luana Patten. The director is listed as Harve Foster and Wilfred Jackson. The running time is 1 hr. 34 min. The genre is Action & Adventure, Animation, Kids & Family, Musical & Performing Arts. The theater release date is Nov 12, 1946. The synopsis describes the film as a blend of live action and animation based on the "Uncle Remus" stories of Joel Chandler Harris. It mentions that the film was awarded the Best Song Oscar for "Zip-a-dee Doo Dah," and that Disney has withheld the movie in the U.S. ever since its last theatrical re-release in 1986.

Click image to enlarge.

Rotton Tomatoes' assessment weighs "delightful fables" against "a sugar-coated depiction of the Reconstruction-era South"

This isn't definitive proof, of course. It's suggestive. It's a possibility.

So, I offer it only as a way to account for Mr. Eng's odd opening gesture. I am, in sum, just sayin'.

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Once Mr. Eng's through this thicket, he is on much firmer ground, providing a standard he-said/she-said account of what happened or didn't happen at Rutgers, moving back and forth between the signatories' letter and the chair's account of the events. Of necessity, this approach involves a considerable amount of summary and direct quotation from the signatories' original letter and the Chair's response to that letter.

But, if we consider a version of Mr. Eng's article, color-coded according to the conventions I established above, it is immediately obvious that the ratio of words Mr. Eng has grabbed from elsewhere to words generated through his own engagement with the subject (which includes independent research, interviews, and editorializing) is greater than the ratios we've seen in the two redactions of the signatories' letter to the editor discussed above:

Cut and Paste Reportage: The Rise of "What...

by rem - <http://text2cloud.com/2012/01/cut-and-paste-reportage-the-rise-of-whatever-journalism/>

The English Department at Rutgers University says it responded swiftly and "with severity and directness" after finding out that a graduate student sent an email to a group of students inviting them to a whites-only screening of the film "Song of the South."

Carolyn Williams, professor and chair of the department, denied allegations contained in a letter to the editor of the student newspaper that department officials had refused to publicly acknowledge "the racist, discriminatory nature of the email."

"The Department of English, like the rest of Rutgers University, finds bias acts unacceptable," she said.

The controversy over the email was first reported this week by The Daily Targum, the student newspaper. The email was sent Sept. 28 by a white graduate student in the English Department to a group of students enrolled with her in a class titled "Post-Bellum/Pre-Harlem." The student invited the group, reportedly also white, to watch a screening of the 1946 Walt Disney movie "Song of the South," which some modern-day observers say is racist and stereotypical in its portrayal of blacks just after the Civil War.

The film, a blend of live action and animation, is based on the fictional African-American character Uncle Remus created in the 1800s by author Joel Chandler Harris. In the movie, Uncle Remus regales a young boy who runs away from home with a series of delightful fables.

"If you do come, hooch is most welcome, as are strawhats and other Darkeyisms. I might even buy a watermillyum if I get enough interest," the email read in part, according to the Targum. The email also noted that guests should be careful whom they brought, because "I might yell racist things at the TV."

Elizabeth Braxton, another graduate student in English, said she was upset when she found out about the email. In a letter to the student newspaper, Braxton and fellow students in a "Race, Ethnicity, and Inequality in Education" class complained:

"This racist email, and the other students' reactions to it - including their silence - have now shaped the learning environment in their classroom, in much the same way as the department's failure to act appropriately has shaped the environment beyond the classroom. A few professors scolded the writer. However, no one in the department publicly acknowledged the racist, discriminatory nature of the email. This was a moment when faculty could have made clear the seriousness with which they regard the critical topics they discuss in the courses they teach. A meaningful and important discussion could have taken place that may have changed or engaged people. Instead, an uncomfortable topic was largely avoided, and the feelings of the student who sent the email were prioritized above the pain of students of color, breeding resentment and misinformation about what was wrong with the email in the first place."

Braxton said Friday she and her classmates stand by the letter but declined further comment.

Williams, in an email Friday to msnbc.com, disputed the assertion that department and university officials were lax in responding.

The screening never took place, and the sender apologized within a few days of the incident to the students she sent it to and to the director of graduate studies, Williams said. She then apologized again to her whole class in early October, Williams said.

"At that time, her apology was accepted. Nevertheless, the original email -- and waves of responses to it -- have of course continued to be hurtful," Williams said.

In a response letter sent this week to the Targum, Williams and Rebecca Walkowitz, acting director of graduate studies, wrote: "In fact we responded immediately with severity and directness; it could not have been misunderstood what we thought about the offending email."

Williams would not say Friday whether the author of the email could face discipline, citing privacy rules.

The incident led to faculty-student meetings and a "civility forum" held Dec. 7, and a committee will begin work early next year on a policy addressing bias.

"The learnings are huge, for all of us -- and they will continue in the spring semester, when we are planning to have workshops, group discussions, lectures, perhaps a conference, and many other activities that will continue to educate our own department members (and perhaps others) about how to respond if such an incident were ever to occur again," Williams told msnbc.com.

"We are committed not only to this educational mission, but to preventing bias in any form, and I look forward, with the department, to pushing forward with this initiative."

It's not the first time Rutgers has found itself engulfed in discrimination controversy. In September 2010, Tyler Clementi, an 18-year-old Rutgers freshman, committed suicide after finding out that he had been taped -- allegedly by his roommate -- having a sexual encounter with another man. And the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights is also reportedly looking into complaints that Rutgers administrators have done little to respond to anti-Semitism on campus.

Click image to enlarge.

Summary (blue), direct quotes (yellow), and erroneous information (red)

By my count, more than a third (~37%, to be sort of exact) of Mr. Eng's article is self-generated. That beats the 5% in the Jezebel piece.

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In his final paragraph, Mr. Eng uses some of this self-generated prose to make the case for why a disagreement between some graduate students and the administrators in the English department might rise to the level of national interest. There, Mr. Eng fabricates a university "engulfed in discrimination controversy" and runs a dotted line from the email to the whites only screening to the suicide of Tyler Clementi (which I've written about extensively [elsewhere](#) on this site) and the recent announcement that the Education Department is looking into allegations of anti-Semitism on the New Brunswick campus.

With the stakes raised to such heights [RACISM, SUICIDE, HOMOPHOBIA, ANTI-SEMITISM!], it doubtless seems petty to point out the spelling errors in the final paragraph of Mr. Eng's article. (Whatever.)

What's more serious are the factual errors included in Mr. Eng's effort to support the signatories' own dubious effort to link the destructive power of this email to the circumstances surrounding Tyler Clementi's suicide. Clementi did not, in fact, commit "suicide after finding out that he had been taped--allegedly by his room[m]ate--having a sexual encounter with another man." No one who has followed this case believes that Clementi's encounter was taped; there is no evidence that has yet been made public to support this. What is clear--rather than alleged--to all involved in the case is that Clement's roommate, Dahrin Ravi, used the web cam in his laptop to spy on Clementi while he was having sex with another man. This is an uncontested fact. What is alleged is that Ravi 's spying was motivated by bias.

The trial to determine whether or not Ravi is guilty as charged begins next month.

Do such distinctions matter?

Actually, they do.

*

Well, not to everyone.

Indeed, what the folks at *MSNBC* understand much better than I do is that the Rutgers' story, as spun by Mr. Eng, is blood in the water. And what becomes clear, in the feeding frenzy that follows, is that the only word of any importance to the rabid commenters is--racism.

I don't pretend to have read all of the 1548 comments the *MSNBC* report has garnered to date. Indeed, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, I'd say that no single person has read all of these comments; they just continue to metastasize, with or without a readership. It's as if, instead of a "quick poll," *msnbc* solicited short answers to the prompt: "Racism: Good or Bad?"

Few of the responses to Mr. Eng's article on the pages I waded through bother to gesture towards the details of what did or didn't happen at Rutgers. In place of the local, contextual details, there's plenty about the NACCP, the Black Entertainment Network, African-History Month, and, well, you get the point--plenty of folks spouting off about preferential treatment and reverse racism. Indeed, I get a few pages in and I can't understand why no one at *msnbc*

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is writing about what the comments on its own site reveal about the state of race relations in the United States in the 21st century. Why no article entitled, "Racist comments on msnbc site rile journalists, staff"?

Here, for example, are three responses taken at random from the heap that continues to grow beneath Mr. Eng's article:



Angry white conservative

,:D

Another boot on the neck of the First Amendment.

Zip a dee doo daaaaah, zip a deee yaaay, my oh my, I wish we were all gray....

Before some of you pile on with the R word, let me inform you that I dated several extremely hot black girls in college.

#834 - Thu Dec 22, 2011 1:27 PM EST

REPLY 1 vote



sailor'52

who are the first group of people who scream racism, bigotry, etc...? **LIBERALS!!!** What a bunch of hypocrites. If you disagree with them, you get called names, insulted, wished dead, and everything that is evil. And they pretend to abhor racism? your rebuttal is welcome, liberals. no name calling. no personal insult. just counter argument. prove me wrong. if you call me names, you just proved me correct.

#835 - Fri Dec 23, 2011 5:39 AM EST

REPLY



LEGAL IMMIGRANT 66

Racism? Why call me a Racist just because I espouse the preference and development of whites over other ethnic groups? Why yes, call me a Racist and I thank you for it, being called a Racist is a great honor for me!

All the hoopla about the Negroes (the so called african americans) in the USA, it just makes me want to puke!

Thanks to Mr. A. Lincoln we are now saddled with the Scourge of the Negroes on this country in perpetuity!

The bottomless pit of Social costs, Welfare, Crime, due to the descendants of the former Slaves;... there is no end to it!

Abolishing slavery in the US was a good thing but only Step one,

Alas, Step two was never implemented; the deportation of all Negroes from the USA back to Africa!

Until Step 2 is implemented there will never be a acceptable solution to the alleged Racist problem in the USA!

White America today owes the Blacks NOTHING! They have all the opportunities to make a economic success of themselves, they have only themselves to blame for their collective misery as well as their collective voluntary enslavement to the democrat party and the failed liberal agenda!

#836 - Fri Dec 23, 2011 4:18 PM EST

REPLY 2 votes

Click image to enlarge.

Gearing up for the holidays

Inadvertently, I would say, *msnbc* has provided a forum for the racial hostility that the signatories have said is hiding in the shadows at the university to stride with rage-filled pride down Main Street in the full light of day. And the sentiments that are given voice to in this forum have a ferocity that makes the turmoil that has been unleashed by the movie-watching preferences of one feckless graduate student at Rutgers seem quaint by comparison.

In the days of mainstream print newspapers, letters of that seethed with the kind of vitriolic hatred that populates the *msnbc* site would never have seen the light of day: space was scarce, what free space there was needed to be used for advertising, and advertisers, by and large, prefer not to appear besides letters calling for "the deportation of all Negroes from the USA back to Africa!"

Now, by contrast, news organizations do everything in their powers to generate traffic to their sites and to create venues where their readers can rant and rave. All that matters in the new economy of the 24-second news cycle is eyeballs on the screen and the clicks that follow.

Cut and Paste Reportage: The Rise of "What..."

by rem - <http://text2cloud.com/2012/01/cut-and-paste-reportage-the-rise-of-whatever-journalism/>

Why publish a wafer-thin story about a single email in an English department?

Because this story has the pieces that will keep people at the site, pounding out their rage, making their ignorance and unhappiness and hatred known to others: it's higher education; it's race; it's popular culture; it's political correctness; it's disapproving.

Publish it and the rest is, well, child's play.

*

The final iteration (to date) of the story about the screening that never happened appears in the online version of the *Daily Mail* two days after the *msnbc* piece.

The *Daily Mail* gets the prize for giving the story the most accurate headline, for it surely is the case that there was (and doubtless still is) "outrage over Rutgers University email for 'whites only' movie screening." Even so, the story of this outrage hasn't fared well in its journey across the Atlantic: the *Daily Mail* prunes it down to just under three hundred words and only a handful of these words are neither directly quoted from the earlier reports or summaries of those other reports.

At this point, can you guess what these handful of "original" words concern? what "original" research they add to the mix?

Are the words supplied by the unnamed reporter:

1. evidence of independent communications with sources cited in the other reports?
2. evidence of independent research that has uncovered other sources that might shed further light on the story?
3. evidence of fresh insight into why this department matter that centers on an errant email has garnered so much attention?
4. evidence of a few minutes on Google looking for a summary of *Song of the South*?
5. none of the above?

Anyone?

*

Well, before we answer that question, let's see what the Doc Cop has to tell us about the words the *Daily Mail* piece shares directly with the *msnbc.com* report, which it references:

Cut and Paste Reportage: The Rise of "What...

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| Case | File | Correlation | File |
|---|-----------------|---|------------|
| 1 of 1 | daily news.docx | 21% | msnbc.docx |
| <p>the english department at rutgers university has denied being lax in its response to an email sent by a graduate student inviting a group of students to a whitesonly screening of the movie song of the south</p> <p>carolyn williams chairman of the department said allegations in a letter to THE STUDENT NEWSPAPER THAT DEPARTMENT OFFICIALS HAD REFUSED TO PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGE THE RACIST DISCRIMINATORY NATURE OF THE EMAIL are false</p> <p>she added that the department finds bias acts unacceptable msnbc com reports</p> <p>the furore over the email emerged earlier this week when the student newspaper the daily targum reported the story</p> <p>it was sent on september by a white student TO A GROUP OF STUDENTS ENROLLED WITH HER IN A CLASS TITLED POSTBELLUM PREHARLEM she invited them to see the walt disney movie song of the south the partlive action partanimation movie has been attacked by some for its stereotypical portrayal of blacks just after the civil war</p> <p>it centres on a fictional africanamerican character called uncle remus who REGALES A YOUNG BOY WHO RUNS AWAY FROM HOME WITH magical fables</p> <p>in a letter to the student newspaper elizabeth braxton another graduate student in english said a few professors scolded the writer</p> <p>HOWEVER NO ONE IN THE DEPARTMENT PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGED THE RACIST DISCRIMINATORY NATURE OF THE EMAIL</p> <p>THIS WAS A MOMENT WHEN FACULTY COULD HAVE MADE CLEAR THE SERIOUSNESS WITH WHICH THEY REGARD THE CRITICAL TOPICS THEY DISCUSS IN THE COURSES THEY TEACH miss williams denies that claim and says the department acted with severity and directness she said the screening never happened and the sender apologized within DAYS OF THE INCIDENT TO THE STUDENTS SHE SENT IT TO she then said sorry to the whole class</p> <p>miss williams did not say whether the email s author could face disciplinary measures</p> | | <p>the english department at rutgers university says it responded swiftly and with severity and directness after finding out that a graduate student sent an email to a group of students inviting them to a whitesonly screening of the film song of the south carolyn williams professor and chair of the department denied allegations contained in a letter to the editor of THE STUDENT NEWSPAPER THAT DEPARTMENT OFFICIALS HAD REFUSED TO PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGE THE RACIST DISCRIMINATORY NATURE OF THE EMAIL the department of english like the rest of rutgers university finds bias acts unacceptable she said</p> <p>the controversy over the email was first reported this week by the daily targum the student newspaper the email was sent sept by a white graduate student in the english department TO A GROUP OF STUDENTS ENROLLED WITH HER IN A CLASS TITLED POSTBELLUM PREHARLEM the student invited the group reportedly also white to watch a screening of the walt disney movie song of the south which some modernday observers say is racist and stereotypical in its portrayal of blacks just after the civil war</p> <p>the film a blend of live action and animation is based on the fictional africanamerican character uncle remus created in the s by author joel chandler harris in the movie uncle remus REGALES A YOUNG BOY WHO RUNS AWAY FROM HOME WITH a series of delightful fables</p> <p>if you do come hooch is most welcome as are strawhats and other darkeyisms i might even buy a watermillum if i get enough interest the email read in part according to the targum the email also noted that guests should be careful whom they brought because i might yell racist things at the tv elizabeth braxton another graduate student in english said she was upset when she found out about the email in a letter to the student newspaper braxton and fellow students in a race ethnicity and inequality in education class complained this racist email and the other students reactions to it including their silence have now shaped the learning environment in their classroom in much the same way as the department s failure to act appropriately has shaped the environment beyond the classroom a few professors scolded the writer HOWEVER NO ONE IN THE DEPARTMENT PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGED THE RACIST DISCRIMINATORY NATURE OF THE EMAIL THIS WAS A MOMENT WHEN FACULTY COULD HAVE MADE CLEAR THE SERIOUSNESS WITH WHICH THEY REGARD THE CRITICAL TOPICS THEY DISCUSS IN THE COURSES THEY TEACH</p> <p>a meaningful and important discussion could have taken place that may have changed or engaged people instead an uncomfortable topic was largely avoided and the feelings of the student who sent the email were prioritized above the pain of students of color breeding resentment and misinformation about what was wrong with the email</p> | |

Click image to enlarge.

21% of The Daily Mail's 298 words come directly from the msnbc.com article

The entirely derivative nature of *The Daily Mail* piece comes to light when, following the procedure established above, I block out sections that summarize, quote directly, and are erroneous:

The English Department at Rutgers University has denied being lax in its response to an email sent by a graduate student inviting a group of students to a whites-only screening of the movie *Song Of The South*.

Carolyn Williams, chairman of the department, said allegations in a letter to the student newspaper that department officials had refused to publicly acknowledge 'the racist, discriminatory nature of the email' are false.

She added that the department 'finds bias acts unacceptable,' msnbc.com reports.

The furore over the email emerged earlier this week when the student newspaper *The Daily Targum* reported the story.

It was sent on September 28 by a white student to a group of students enrolled with her in a class titled 'Post-Bellum/Pre-Harlem.'

She invited them to see the 1946 Walt Disney movie *Song Of The South*. The part-live action, part-animation movie has been attacked by some for its stereotypical portrayal of blacks just after the Civil War.

It centres on a fictional African-American character called Uncle Remus who regales a young boy who runs away from home with magical fables.

In a letter to the student newspaper, Elizabeth Braxton, another graduate student in English, said: 'A few professors scolded the writer.'

'However, no one in the department publicly acknowledged the racist, discriminatory nature of the email.'

'This was a moment when faculty could have made clear the seriousness with which they regard the critical topics they discuss in the courses they teach.'

Miss Williams denies that claim and says the department acted with 'severity and directness.'

She said the screening never happened and the sender apologized within days of the incident to the students she sent it to. She then said sorry to the whole class.

Miss Williams did not say whether the email's author could face disciplinary measures.

Click image to enlarge.

Summary (blue), direct quotes (yellow), and erroneous information (red)

Cut and Paste Reportage: The Rise of "What...

by rem - <http://text2cloud.com/2012/01/cut-and-paste-reportage-the-rise-of-whatever-journalism/>

The Daily Mail version is so faithful to its original that it even repeats the error regarding the departmental affiliation of the cited signatory.

And that patch of 44 non-highlighted words, the ones I described as "original" above?

Well, the possibility that these words constitute independent research into *Song of the South* dissolves as soon as we set the *Daily Mail* summary of *Song of the South* next to the msnbc.com summary:

The Daily Mail : The part-live action, part-animation movie has been attacked by some for its stereotypical **portrayal of blacks just after the Civil War**.

It centres on a **fictional African-American character** called **Uncle Remus who regales a young boy who runs away from home with** magical fables.

msnbc.com: . . . "**Song of the South**," which some modern-day observers say is racist and stereotypical in its **portrayal of blacks just after the Civil War**.

The film, a blend of live action and animation, is based on the **fictional African-American character** Uncle Remus created in the 1800s by author Joel Chandler Harris. In the movie, **Uncle Remus regales a young boy who runs away from home with a series of** delightful fables.

Unattributed direct quotations in the Daily Mail article taken from the msnbc article

So, on second look, it turns out that 25 of the 44 words I designated as "original" in the *Daily Mail's* summary of *Song of the South* come from word strings that appear in the msnbc.com summary.

And then there are the clumsy substitutions: "a blend of live action and animation" becomes "part-live action, part-animation" and those "delightful fables" become "magical fables."

There used to be a name for writing that proceeded in this way.

Oh well, I guess there's no need to belabor the obvious

*

Or it is so obvious?

What's the best name for the writing practices I have detailed here?

In [my preceding post](#), I discussed a newspaper report on a young woman who was trying to

minor in communications at Rutgers when she was accused of plagiarizing a paper. Depending on your source, the young woman either failed to properly cite her sources or she presented the work of others as her own.

By chance, the story about the "outrage" at Rutgers that I've focussed on in this post broke at roughly the same time. In this instance, though, we've seen a number of examples of online news outlets defining "reporting" as passing on uncorroborated, decontextualized information and then dispensing with the pretense of being concerned with fact-checking, accuracy, attribution.

We've seen that, if corrections are made, they're slapped on without considering if the correction alters the original report. And so, by the end of this process, we've watched an open letter expressing concern about departmental and administrative practices at Rutgers become a report on an administrator's refutation of a letter to the editor at a university somewhere in the United States. In between, tens of thousands of people have read, skimmed, or just clicked on one or more versions of what did or did not happen.

It's easy enough to provide pejorative labels for this kind of writing. It's plagiarism; it's derivative, irresponsible, reckless, inaccurate, unhelpful, banal, stupid.

It's don't find any of these labels useful, though. They don't describe. They pass judgment. And in so doing, they generate no new understanding or insight. For these reasons, I prefer a more descriptive label: what most strikes me after working through all the reports that have followed the publication of the signatories' letter to the editor last month is just how *incurious* all the writing is. It's as if none of the writers could be bothered to wonder about the version of events contained in the letter to the editor.

All stories have gaps. All explanations have telling silences. It's the nature of things: no set of words can ever provide a full account of what makes a given social encounter cut this way rather than that.

For example:

- There are eleven signatories: how hard would it have been to get in touch with at least one of them directly to gain a fuller picture?
- Or to learn just a little bit about minstrelsy, Uncle Remus, Joel Chandler Harris, and the history of the reception of *Song of the South*?
- Or to followup on anyone of a number of the claims made in the aftermath of the publication of the letter to the editor?

This incuriousness is reflected, as well, in the host of online comments that have been generated in the wake of the story's week of fame on the Web.

News for the incurious.

Be outraged.

Cut and Paste Reportage: The Rise of "What...

by rem - <http://text2cloud.com/2012/01/cut-and-paste-reportage-the-rise-of-whatever-journalism/>

And after that?

Whatever.

*

Is curiosity teachable?

Is there a virtue in taking the long cut, in going all the way round the barn on occasion?

Are there times when it is better not to just get right to the point, times when there's something to be gained by slowing down, turning the problem this way and that, waiting for something new or unusual to shake its way free?

Here's what happens if you enter the words, "Rutgers" and "racism" into Google:

The image shows a Google search interface. The search bar contains the text "Rutgers Racism". Below the search bar, it says "Search" and "About 1,300,000 results (0.23 seconds)". On the left side, there are filters for "Everything", "Images", "Maps", "Videos", "News", "Shopping", and "More". Below these are filters for "Any time" (Past hour, Past 24 hours, Past week, Past month, Past year, Custom range...) and "More search tools". On the right side, there are search results. The first result is "Rutgers English Dept. Responds To Racist Email [Updated]" with a snippet: "Dec 14, 2011 - Yesterday, a group of Rutgers students took the English Dept. to task for failing to respond to a student's racist email about a whites-only ...". The second result is "Rutgers Student Proposes Whites-Only Screening Of Racist Movie ..." with a snippet: "Dec 13, 2011 - Recently, students in the Rutgers University English Dept. received an exceedingly crap email, inviting them to a screening of a racist Disney ...". The third result is "'Racist' email for whites-only movie viewing riles Rutgers students, staff" with a snippet: "Dec 16, 2011 - The English Department at Rutgers University says it responded swiftly and 'with severity and directness' after finding out that a graduate ...". The fourth result is "'Racist' Movie Invite Riles Rutgers | Drudge Retort" with a snippet: "Dec 17, 2011 - A graduate student at Rutgers University sent classmates a whites-only invitation Sept. 28 to a screening of the 1946 film Song of the South, ...". The fifth result is "Rutgers Racism" with a snippet: "Dec 16, 2011 - Graduate students at Rutgers University in New Jersey are asking officials to step in after a student there invited peers to a screening of a movie ...". The sixth result is "Rutgers Student Orchestrates 'Whites Only' Screening of Racist ..." with a snippet: "Dec 14, 2011 - Yes, racism still exists. Complex.com: The original buyer's guide for men.". The seventh result is "Don Imus and Nappy Headed Hos - YouTube" with a video thumbnail and snippet: "Apr 7, 2007 - 1 min - Uploaded by aclusux Don Imus is fired for calling Rutgers women's basketball team ... @ baphomet1978 Probably true, but I ...". The eighth result is "Racism - Research Guides - Rutgers, The State University of New ..." with a snippet: "Dec 20, 2011 - Deals with racism at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. Five different students are interviewed: a black separatist, a white male who ...".

Click image to enlarge.

Rutgers' Digital Tattoo, 1/12/11

Everything depends on what happens after the click.

Cut and Paste Reportage: The Rise of "What..."

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¹I can find no explanation for the original rationale for giving the paper this name. I can fabricate a folk etymology: the student paper provides a clarifying gloss on the world's mysteries, but I've just made this up off the top of my head.

²Indeed, as I argued in [the previous post](#), there's another reason to resist fighting an online battle to clear one's name: the more one fights, the richer and deeper the digital tattoo applied by the search engines becomes (i.e, the more one generates occasions where the words "Rutgers" "English" and "Racist" can appear together).

Still don't believe this is a problem?

Do a search on Rick Santorum.

Google Rick Santorum

Search About 2,270,000 results (0.19 seconds)

Everything [Iowa Was Just The Beginning | Rick Santorum for President](#)
www.ricksantorum.com/
Official campaign site provides his biography, news and information on how to support his candidacy.

Images

Maps

Videos [Santorum](#)
spreadingsantorum.com/
Santorum 1. The frothy mix of lube and fecal matter that is sometimes the byproduct of anal sex. 2. Senator **Rick Santorum**.

News

Shopping 12,580 people +1'd this

More

Click image to enlarge.

Santorum defined: 2nd hit, just below Santorum's official campaign site (image recorded on 1/10/12)

To learn more about how Rick Santorum, notoriously homophobic, is now inextricably linked to the mixture of sperm and feces, see *Mother Jones'* article: [Rick Santorum's Anal Sex Problem](#).

Jezebel's revised article may be found [here](#).

The *Huffington Post* version of the story may be found [here](#).

The *msnbc* version of the story may be found [here](#).

The *Daily Mail* version of the story may be found [here](#).

The letter to the editor of *The Daily Targum* may be found [here](#).

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The Anna North interview is reprinted on the Amazon page advertising her novel. It may be found [here](#).

The Rotten Tomatoes review of *Song of the South* can be found [here](#).

This work has been composed by:

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Feedback welcome, as is attribution. This isn't for commercial use.

Enjoy.