


# Deconstructing Borders

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Williams faculty explore how social media has moved from the personal to the political and now to the pedagogical—as both a teaching tool and a subject of critical study.

*Social media has the potential to build community, create solidarity and spread ideas more quickly and broadly than ever. It can also deepen divisions, silence voices and skew perceptions of reality. In a wide-ranging conversation led by sociology professor Christina Simko in May, professors María Elena Cepeda in Latina/o studies, VaNatta Ford in Africana studies, Bill Jannen '09 in computer science and Saadia Yacoob in religion delved into these issues and more.*

Illustrations by Shout

CHRISTINA SIMKO: Can you start by introducing yourselves and your relationship to social media?

SAADIA YACOOB: This is my fourth year here. I teach in the religion department on all issues related to Islam. Social media plays a big role in my teaching. That's the only way I can connect students to living conversations, because there aren't local communities they can visit.

VANATTA FORD: I'm an assistant professor in Africana studies. I've also been here four years. My background is in rhetoric and communication, encompassing media and social media. I teach a class specifically on social media, Trending Black. In my own research on colorism in music, conversations about color happen on social media. I'm concerned with how black folks curate digital spaces—not just African-Americans but global blacks. What does it mean to be Afro-Latino or continental African, and how are people having conversations about color and pop culture?

BILL JANNEN '09: I joined the computer science department two years ago. I don't use social media personally, but I talk about it in class and use it in labs and projects with students.

**VaNatta Ford** Africana Studies

“Online spaces have helped me to be in solidarity with things going on around the world.”

MARÍA ELENA CEPEDA: I've been here since 2005, in Latina/Latino studies. My training is in media, ethnic, gender and American studies. I use social media, and a lot of my classes are on media studies, popular culture and cultural studies. I think a lot about how our students use visual forms of communication more than traditional textual forms. I'm interested in how Latinos in the United States and globally use social media, often in ways they think of as being transgressive but actually are not. I also think about surveillance and data mining.

JANNEN: That was one of the things I focused on in my tutorial The Socio-Techno Web: “Let's be skeptical about all technologies.” We looked at the implicit contract you make as a social media user.

YACOOB: Surveillance has definitely been one of the issues in the American Muslim community.

FORD: It's interesting how it's become part of social media, but surveilling people who push back has been the American way.

SIMKO: Can you all talk about the intersections between identity and social media?

CEPEDA: I can't separate them. This has long been understood in media studies—your offline identity is not separate from your online identity. Sometimes students idealize social media as this democratic space where the categories you occupy offline don't influence what's going on online. That's not the way it works.



VaNatta Ford,  
Africana Studies

YACOOB: What's interesting is the footprint you leave. On social media, everybody can bring up an old screenshot.

CEPEDA: But we cling to the idea that it's impermanent. That shapes people's behaviors online and sometimes leads them to articulate things they might not necessarily do in other spaces.

YACOOB: Earlier this year, Amena Khan, a British Muslim beauty blogger, was hired by L'Oreal as their first hijab-wearing model for their hair-care campaign. In less than a week she stepped down because of some tweets from four years ago when she criticized the Israeli occupation. She ended up apologizing for the tweets, but if you're racialized as a Muslim, it doesn't matter what you say. That one tweet that you had several years ago is seen as a marker of the real you.

**María Elena Cepeda** Latina/o Studies

"Leaving social media is a privilege or luxury for some people. But for people that are in marginalized communities ... it's not quite so easy."

FORD: Do you think it also depends on who the person is? Linda Sarsour [a political activist and former executive director of the Arab American Association of New York] has always gotten flack, but she's been able to recover, at least in certain circles where people still view her as relevant. I wonder if some of it is about who it is and what job or status they're taking.

YACOOB: Yes. But somebody like Linda Sarsour—there are certain circles in which she is able to recover, precisely because those circles are committed to fighting any attack on a prominent Arab American Muslim woman. Then there are other circles who keep bringing up tweets from when she wasn't so prominent and thus spoke less guardedly. What she might say now doesn't matter. What she said several years ago matters. Yet people who claim to be ex-Muslims have every right to shift their identity, because that plays into the narrative.

JANNEN: Surveillance is a big consumer of storage products and technologies. Storage media is so cheap that it's always worth it to store everything. In my tutorial I asked: Are we against surveillance in principle, or are we against the use of data once it's collected? We discussed how different countries have borders and laws, but the digital world spans all of that.

CEPEDA: It doesn't respect borders.

SIMKO: In the E.U., there is the right to be forgotten. Students in my course on memory and forgetting are puzzled by how this works in a global community that increasingly doesn't recognize borders in how we communicate with others.

YACOOB: It becomes a challenge when you live in a part of the world where you are socialized into thinking you can speak more freely, because surveillance happens in ways that are not overt. But what if you also have connections in parts of the world where surveillance is much more obvious? Your



María Elena  
Cepeda, Latina/o  
Studies

sense of self has to keep changing based on the geographical locations you're attached to.

**Bill Jannen** '09 Computer Science

"Different countries have borders and laws, but the digital world spans all of that."

SIMKO: Sociologist Erving Goffman, whose "social life" is analogous to the theater, says we're all essentially actors performing various social roles. He calls this "impression management." How has social media influenced the performance of identity?

FORD: We all perform in different ways on social media, but normative performativity worries me. I try to help my students understand that they can perform as they're navigating social media spaces and still be themselves but at the same time not try to curate something unreal.

CEPEDA: Performance, per se, is part of being a human being. But social media spaces strike me as being both mundane and spectacular, in that people tend to post, articulate and speak about both the most banal and the most compelling moments in their lives, and there's not a lot in between. It's a different way of understanding the world. Take selfies, which can strike people of an older generation as narcissistic.



YACOOB: I'm definitely of that generation. I see selfies and I'm like, "You didn't need a selfie in that post. You just want people to say you look good."

FORD: It's human to want to be affirmed. But I wonder if social media has interfered on what's positive or healthy affirmation. There's something to be said about why we're only looking for affirmation this way.

SIMKO: I'm wondering if you think social media has collapsed our identities in some significant way. Actors were once able to segregate their roles—teacher, student, parent, activist—because they play them all in physically distinct spheres. But you can't tailor your performance to specific audiences when you only have one Twitter feed.

CEPEDA: This is something I notice because I'm from an immigrant family. I have one foot in Colombia, one foot in the United States. I have the audience I write to in Spanish, the audience I write to in Spanglish and the audience I write to in English, and then there are different kinds of English, different rhetorical strategies. But there are some uses of language and concepts where it's like the borders have dissolved.

**Christina Simko** Sociology

"I'm interested in the tension between community building and social fragmentation in digital spaces."

YACOOB: I post a lot on feminist engagements with the Islamic tradition. I know people on Facebook who, when I meet them in person, say, “Oh, you’re Saadia Yacoob? But you’re so nice!” Because they read my critiques in a certain tone. They have their own assumption about how someone posting about these things sounds.

CEPEDA: That has everything to do with the interior voices with which they’re reading: “OK, Muslim feminist.”

FORD: I get this, too. There has not been a lot of research yet on how language, especially African-American vernacular English, has been used throughout not just Black Twitter, but Twitter.

CEPEDA: It’s like memes.

FORD: The ways in which people post a meme is in the tradition of black humor, specifically African-American humor and language. It has shaped and created a cultural tradition via a platform that wasn’t meant to be “black.”

CEPEDA: I see that as different from using African- American vernacular language in a meme. Reposting or retweeting it is different than the tradition of Black Twitter, which I think of as like what bell hooks would call “talking back.” I don’t think people have that fine-grained awareness. I want to stop and ask them, “Do you know what you’re doing?”

FORD: Most of the time, I have no problem unless people make it seem like they created it. There’s always going to be cultural exchange. I don’t think people realize they’re posting in a way that came out of something very black.

SIMKO: I’m interested in the tension between community building and social fragmentation in digital spaces. To borrow a phrase from one of VaNatta’s course descriptions, people of color have created their own spaces to curate, articulate and produce culture through social media. That evokes the potential of social media to underwrite solidarity and connectivity. As we continue to work through the ramifications of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, help us think about the ways that platforms like Facebook have also been harnessed to deepen existing political divides.



Christina Simko,  
Sociology

**Saadia Yacoob** Religion

“Social media is powerful in terms of solidarity but also ways in which certain people get silenced.”

JANNEN: I had a tutorial unit on this: Defend or reject influence bubbles as having a positive impact. Responses were split. Students were saying, “Social media is a place where, if I can’t connect to my physical community, I can speak to like-minded people on Facebook.” But at the same time, people with views that we might disagree with can also



amplify anger and hate in ways they couldn't if they had to find people to talk to in person. The platforms themselves guard against or promote this type of behavior.

FORD: In terms of solidarity, I'm thinking about activists—Afro-Latino activists in Colombia, Brazil, other parts of the world, who have been killed—I found out about on social media. Even if I don't know people, online spaces have helped me to be in solidarity with things going on around the world.

YACOOB: Social media is powerful in terms of solidarity but also ways in which certain people get silenced. Within the American Muslim community, debates are raging around gender, sexuality and race. We're such a small community relative to other communities in the U.S., and we're spread out. Social media becomes the one platform where all of us are. It has facilitated allowing people who usually don't have voices in institutional spaces to have a voice, particularly black Muslims. I have a very different sense of where I think the American Muslim community is in terms of thinking about these issues because I follow it on social media and I don't have a local community. Then I go into institutional spaces, and these conversations are not traveling there, precisely because the solidarity is happening on social media. My hope is that social media allows us to build solidarities that can translate into how people are physically forming communities.

CEPEDA: I started a Facebook group for a really small subset of Latina/o studies. We've been growing, and out of that group we organized a conference at Williams. But when I go into the community and start talking to people, I see that my conversations over Facebook are not connecting with what's going on on the ground.

YACOOB: I feel, being in rural New England, isolated from the communities where I have a sense of belonging. Social media is the place where I can still engage in conversations that, five years ago, I used to engage in face to face with people I knew.

CEPEDA: I just posted an article about how leaving social media is a privilege or luxury for some people. But for people that are in marginalized communities that are looking for a sense of belonging, it's not quite so easy.

SIMKO: Social media moves so much more rapidly than our ordinary pace of scholarly production. I'm curious how you deal with this gap between scholarly and media temporalities in your work.

CEPEDA: I'm writing an article about a viral video from 2016, and it's probably going to be published in 2019. You accept that, if you work in popular-culture media, you're always going to be lagging behind.

FORD: Citations are behind social media at all times. In my own research, I come up with my own ways to document it. And I try to get permission from the person who posted it. Some students write papers using memes. I tell them, "Even if you don't find the person who created it, find the earliest recollection of the earliest usage of this meme." Because sometimes people

use a meme or language and don't give credit, and then it gets used by Perez Hilton or the Kardashians, and it's like, "Oh, they created that." No, they didn't. It was probably a black girl like Kayla, aka "Peaches Monroe," that created the phrase "On Fleek" that many celebs have used, and she's received no royalties for her creation of pop-culture lingo.

CEPEDA: We are doing this work on the assumption that everybody sees these as legitimate pieces of knowledge. That's a fight I've had, articulating for people, "No, actually, this is legitimate data. This is why, and this is how I'm using it, and there's a methodology to it."

YACOOB: Scholarly conversations take so long to come out, and then you have to have a certain amount of privilege in order to be able to access the conversations, whether it's buying those books or being able to read those books and understand the conversations. I've been thinking about how to create ways in which scholarship can be in conversation with a more public audience.



SIMKO: Bill, you might have a different angle on temporality and the gap between transformations in social media and our ability to regulate them.

JANNEN: We all rely on social media platforms as a way of communicating, but we don't have any control over how they're administered or what happens when we use them. We create digital footprints that get collected and analyzed and sold and anonymized, but you can de-anonymize anything. We put a lot of trust in companies that do not have our best interests in mind.

SIMKO: Is it fair to say that we forget, or we're not aware, that we're the product?

JANNEN: That realization is coming now to a lot of people. What if Twitter charged us? I would gladly pay money to have privacy back or a sense of ownership of the things I'm putting out there. But a lot of the students in my tutorial say, "I just want this free thing. I get all these benefits, so I'm willing to overlook the negatives."



FORD: And some people can't afford it. According to Pew, people of color use social media more than any other group. In different countries, the phone is the way in which you communicate with family. I would pay for privacy, but the character of some of the innovation that comes out—the language and ideas—would change.

YACOOB: There's a way in which we have transcended the nation-state model, in the sense that the nation-state doesn't entirely determine who we are and how we're formed, because

social media allows you to engage with conversations that are happening around the world. But at the same time, companies are working with nation-states to surveil people. The national conversation in the U.S. about “Islamic extremism” has shifted from, “What are the mosques where these people are being radicalized?” to now saying, “Well, most of these people don’t go to mosques. They get radicalized online.” That’s criminalizing people’s online presence—who they’re following, who they’re “liking,” who they’re reposting, what they’re posting. So, we have not transcended, because the nation-state still has the ability and the power.

SIMKO: I wonder if we all might reflect on the role of social media in pedagogy. I have no doubt that your students spend time analyzing what happens on social media. I’m also curious about the ways you have students using social media in classroom settings.

CEPEDA: I teach a media studies methods class, and the final project is to go into a community online. They observe and participate at the same time. They interview people within the community and write a paper about it. I want them to see this as a legitimate area of inquiry—and that there is a method to studying it. These are cultural texts just like any other text.

FORD: I’m trying to help students understand how to critically analyze these texts. There was a video after the Cleveland Cavaliers won the NBA championship in 2016, where LeBron James is talking about the win, and he’s super passionate about it, and somebody put a Hammond organ soundtrack under it. How LeBron articulated this win in his excitement reminded us of the black Protestant tradition. So we use thematic analysis to answer a research question: How and why do videos utilize black Protestant Christianity characteristics?

YACOOB: Globally, we’re moving toward a visual medium. You have AJ+ videos, Vice and Now This. So, I can give you an article to read—or you can go and watch the video. One of my pedagogical goals is to help students learn how to communicate the research they’re doing in a visual format by producing a three- to four-minute video on something they’ve researched throughout the semester.

FORD: My students have done podcasts. I’ve had them do documentary projects, mini-docs, video essays. They end up doing a paper where they have to pick some text or group of texts from various social media platforms and pick a method to analyze it. I’m always still grounding them in scholarly work.

