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# INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

# Does 'Digital Divide' Rhetoric Do More Harm Than Good?

## Some scholars fear that the discussion discourages the creation of content

BY JEFFREY R. YOUNG

WARNINGS ABOUT a continuing "digital divide" could be doing more harm than good to African-Americans and other minority groups, portraying them as technophobic charity cases who lack the desire to adopt new technologies on their own. That's the conclusion some scholars are reaching as they study issues of race and technology.

The stereotype of technophobic minority groups, these scholars argue, could discourage businesses or academics from creating content or services tailored for minority communities—ultimately making the digital divide a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"The rhetoric of the digital divide holds open this division between civilized tool-users and uncivilized nonusers," says Henry Jenkins, director of comparative media studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "As well-meaning as it is as a policy initiative, it can be marginalizing and patronizing in its own terms."

A growing number of scholars are questioning popular assumptions about the digital divide in an attempt to reframe public discussions about race and technology, as well as about the social impacts of technology. Too often, these scholars say, discussions about the digital divide focus on installing computer hardware rather than on helping develop online content for underrepresented communities or on trying to use computers to solve problems. In several recent books and conferences, scholars make the case for a more nuanced dialogue on the issue.



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TODD BIGELOW FOR THE CHRONICLE

In addition to calling for greater investment in online content that meets the needs of African-Americans and others who may not feel that the Internet is for them, scholars are also calling attention to the contributions that have already been made where such investments have happened, emphasizing the benefit of having as many voices as possible in cyberspace. "In a multicultural world, you have technology as a black and white story," says Alondra Nelson, a graduate student in American studies at New York University. "When the digital divide becomes the only discourse we have for talking about technology and race, that's really problematic."

### AN INFLUENTIAL REPORT

Discussions of the digital divide—the gap separating those who have computers and Internet access from those who don't—have often focused on demographic data indicating that members of ethnic minority groups are less likely to be connected to the Net than are white people. The notion first gained widespread media attention after the release in 1998 of a report, "Falling through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide," by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

But such data tell only part of the story, some scholars say.

"The point is that there are many other divides that are connected to this notion of this digital divide," said Walter E. Massey, president of Morehouse College, at a conference this past spring at MIT. "As we



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bridge the digital divide, our goal should be to use the new technologies to make sure we close all the other divides that have plagued, and continue to plague, our society." The MIT conference was called "Race in Digital Space."

Tara L. McPherson, an assistant professor of cinema and television at the University of Southern California, and one of the organizers of the conference, put it more sharply during one panel discussion: "Obviously there is a digital divide—the idea of challenging the digital divide is not about denying its existence. But it is to ensure that the focus on the digital divide doesn't naturalize a kind of exclusion of investment in the communities we are speaking about here."

In an interview, Ms. McPherson points out that media accounts of the digital divide often ignore contributions that African-Americans and other minority groups have made to technoculture.

### TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATORS

"Historically, communities of color have been technological innovators," she says. "Look at hip-hop and DJ culture, and at how richly technological those cultures are ... I think we can read MP3 [and music trading online] as coming out of a kind of innovation of cut and mix that comes out of America's inner cities."

One scholar, Anna Everett, is compiling a book to tell the story of some prominent African-American computer enthusiasts who were involved in the earliest experiments in building a sense of community among Internet users. "I found out about a lot of black early adopters of technology who were always missing from [media] accounts." says Ms. Everett, an as-

sociate professor of film, TV, and new-media studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara. "I was really surprised at how widely and effectively and early on African-Americans were involved in technology."

As examples, she cites some of her favorite Web sites: Sistahspace (http://www.sistahspace.com), which highlights the work of black female artists; Black Geeks Online (http://www.blackgeeks.net), a site designed to "connect tech-savvy African-Americans"; as well as DJspooky.com, the home page for the techno musician and writer Paul D. Miller. Ms. Everett's book, *Digital Diasporas: A Race for Cyberspace,* is due out next year from SUNY Press.

Other scholars studying the digital divide—even those who have not focused on issues of race and technology—are calling on policy makers to view technology gaps within a broader social context.

"There's more work being done now on critical studies of the digital divide," says Leslie Shade, assistant professor of communication at the University of Ottawa. Ms. Shade was one of the organizers of a conference last month of the Association of Internet Researchers, where more than a dozen researchers presented papers on social aspects of the digital divide.

### GOING BEYOND THE NUMBERS

"A lot of this research is more qualitative research," she says. "It's going beyond just the numbers of who's online and looking at what people are really doing online."

A new committee on the digital divide is hoping to foster greater discussions among academics, policy makers, and nonprofit groups to address issues of technology access. The committee, organized by the

National Communication Association, a scholarly society, began work this summer.

"I think that it's a matter of having content that is relevant to people's lives. If there's no reason for people to go online, then why should they?" says Susan Kretchmer, a leader of the committee. "The culture that created and currently dominates the Internet is largely white."

But researchers focusing on social impacts of technology do not

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often talk with those who study the demographics of technology distribution, says Kate Williams, a doctoral student in information science at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. "One of the frustrations for all of us" doing this work, she says, "is that we have not yet been able to sum up all the research on the digital divide."

To help foster communication among those studying the issues, Ms. Williams organized a conference in August that brought together 21 graduate students from 14 countries who are exploring various aspects of the digital divide. "The digital divide is really tied up with other social problems, and it is more effective to try to address these problems together," she says. "It's really not a technological issue, but a social issue."

Other scholars have started to

argue that the digital divide is more of a myth than crisis.

### A MYTH OR A CRISIS?

That's the position of Benjamin M. Compaine, a senior research affiliate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Program on Internet & Telecoms Convergence, in his new book *The Digital Divide: Facing a Crisis or Creating a Myth?* (MIT Press, 2001). Mr. Compaine says that earlier technological innovations, such as radio and television, have been adopted over time by most economic and ethnic groups without any government involvement. With those earlier technologies, he adds, no one called for programs to be set up to make sure people had the devices. So why, he asks, should computers and the Internet be treated any differently?

But such arguments worry many other scholars—especially those who believe that the Internet can be more empowering to underserved communities than earlier technologies were.

"I think that there's now an evolution in how our society communicates and how information is transferred and collected and disseminated," says Ms. Kretchmer. "I think it's essential that everybody be able to participate in that and be empowered."

Some scholars say they see signs of improvement in discussions of the digital divide, especially since the dot-com bubble has burst and some of the hype around the Internet has died down.

### THE COMPUTER AS A TOOL

"I wish the economy was in a better state," says Ms. Nelson, of New York University. "But perhaps we can now have a more measured and tempered conversation about what technology can and can't do,

and what technology does and doesn't change."

That's welcome news to Dolores E. Cross, president of Morris Brown College. The college is one of the first historically black institutions to require students to own laptop computers. She says she was persuaded to start the laptop program after college officials conducted interviews with more than 600 parents, most of whom supported the idea. She is a strong believer in the importance of access to technology—she says that computer literacy is becoming as much of a basic of education as reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Even so, she argues that the computer should be seen as a tool, rather than an end in itself.

"Merely having access to a box—an information box—does not necessarily mean that you have improved, or that you're more literate, or that you're better able to solve problems in the community," she says. "What the industry is saying is, buy this, buy that."

"We're spending all of our time in terms of having 'the latest,'" she adds. "At some points we have to be looking at, 'the latest for what?'" ∎