

Grappling with the Net: Blacks, Latinos, Women & The Need for Universal Access

By River Ginchild
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You can now confidently say “Welcome to the planet” to anyone who has not heard of the Internet. Nearly every household in the country has been bombarded by shrink-wrapped diskettes and CDs offering “free trial access” to the Net, as it's commonly called. Yet in spite of the heavy media coverage of on-line culture and the business world's newfound obsession with Internet-related companies and activities, fewer than 10 percent of North Americans actually have any kind of meaningful access to the Net. The Internet may be the main component of the information superhighway, but making the conversion from what is now a limited-access road to a true public-access thoroughfare will require some work.

Understanding the language of the Net and being able to utilize its material are rapidly becoming part of a new basic survival literacy. Every field of employment has been changed by computers and computer-mediated communication. However, telecommunications-industry marketing is primarily geared toward “early adapters”-- those who can easily and readily purchase its products and services. In fact, the average annual income of “Net households” is approximately \$60,000. According to a recent study by analyst Kofi Asiedu Ofori, electronic redlining (i.e., bypassing poor communities) “will contribute to the economic decline of impoverished city neighborhoods and create isolated islands of 'information have-nots.’” A 1995 study by the Rand Institute stated that without government intervention to close the widening gap, the nation will soon be experiencing “information apartheid.” Private Party or Public Revolution?

Many technically minded activists claim that the Net has the potential to be a forum for revolution, but at the moment it's still largely a reserve for the early adapters. During a recent panel on universal access at the Ethics of the Internet conference in Berkeley, Calif., the question “Aren't you afraid that multiculturalism [on the Net] will slow us down?” was shamelessly posed by a member of the audience. At that moment I knew that I (one of two people of African descent in the audience of approximately 150) wanted to be a force in bringing more people like me on line.

The cost of being on line is a major factor in the underrepresentation of some communities on the Net, but the lack of relevant information on the Net also contributes to the lack of participation. According to the Rand study, approximately 13 percent of African American, Latino and Native American households have computers, compared to 31 percent of White and 37 percent of Asian American households.

While race and ethnicity as indicators of on-line access have remained constant in the last several years, income and educational status are becoming better indicators. “There is good news and bad news,” says Art McGee, coordinator of the African Network of the Institute for Global Communications. “There is an explosion of people of color on line, but there are many who are slipping through the cracks. These are the people who have much more than technology missing in their lives.” McGee says he dreams of a future in which technology will be used for communication between African peoples throughout the world, free of the media filters that currently prevent us working together.

Countering the commercial focus of many areas of cyberspace are some exciting telecommunications projects focusing on social and economic justice issues. The Women's Economic Agenda Project (WEAP) in Oakland, Calif., is launching the Women and Technology Program to provide women with computer education and training and involve grassroots leadership in community revitalization. Recently, the Berkeley Macintosh Users Group (BMUG), which is "in the business of giving away information," started a Computer Placement Program, in which BMUG gives donated computers to low-income families and offers follow-up training and technical assistance.

Randy Ross, a consultant and member of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian Information/Technology Committee, draws a parallel between Custer's 19th-century raid of the Black Hills and the "elite techno-barons of the end of the 20th century." Ross, a South Dakotan, warns that the privatization of the electronic world is likely to result in high-cost access in rural areas. He urges that demonstration projects be deployed in these underserved communities. One example is the way the Native American Public Telecommunications Company has worked with Native Nations to come up with recommendations for ways to get Native Americans on the Net, such as local community networks serving rural areas.

LatinoNet is a telecommunications network that primarily serves the Latino community's nonprofit sector, but America Online refused to allow the network to operate a "public area" on AOL, according to Ana Montes, a former LatinoNet systems administrator, "because they felt that we could not generate enough on-line time from our members." "It was not enough that we got a lot of people to sign on," she said. "We do not encourage our members to spend a lot of time on line with any service. We educate them on how to use the Internet effectively to get what they need and to use it as a vehicle of empowerment. Our slogan is 'get on, get in, do what you need to do and get off.'" When Montes asked why AOL did not expand into Latin America, she was basically told that the corporation "did not believe that the technology was there yet, or enough users to guarantee high profits."

The idea of "no taxation without information" sparked the creation of Austin Free-Net according to its executive director, Sue Beckwith. While the idea of a free network had been floating around Austin, Texas' digerati for a while, lack of time and funding prevented its realization. In 1995 the city committed funding to start the Free-Net when it recognized that many residents were being shut out of civic participation on line. The project's goal is to have Internet access in all public libraries, public-housing learning centers, job training centers and even barber shops in order to involve traditionally underserved communities. Currently, the city's World Wide Web site is updated daily with information on proposed ordinances and schedules for public hearings and city meetings. Residents' excitement for the program is indicated by the more than 100 community volunteers the project has attracted in its first year.

Use It or Lose It

Despite these progressive efforts it is likely that low-income people will be riding coach on the Net for a while longer. The older-model computers and modems that many community and nonprofit groups operate may be adequate for E-mail. But these same groups are often not equipped to process the graphics, video and sound features available on the World Wide Web. The reality is that universal access won't truly be attained unless and until every community is equipped with the technology to produce, create and disseminate information, not merely to passively consume it. Rates and equipment must be made affordable--and training must be readily available--in order to productively apply the technology. Once this is achieved, we must continually redefine access as the technology advances.

Everyone, whether on line or not, can contribute to the goal of universal access. If you have skills, share them! Invite people to your home or office, and give a demonstration. If you are not connected yet, visit your local public library. Many have computers that allow patrons to access the Internet. Nonprofit groups can get connected with volunteers with expertise in both hardware and software through San Francisco-based CompuMentor, which has affiliate projects in Chicago; Boston; Schenectady, N.Y.; New Orleans and Bellevue, WA. We all can work with progressive media organizations to assure universal access. Once you are connected, produce your own content! Setting up a Web site or a discussion group is not rocket science. I set up a site called Digital Sojourn because I wanted to see a place for myself and other women of African descent on the Web. I had only seen one or two other pages set up by Black women when I put my first page up in June 1995. A year later, the World Wide Web is still overwhelmingly white and male, but every day there are more women and people of color online creating exciting material. I did it. You can do it.

Here's a small sampling of treats for the mind, the eye and the ear!

Digital Sojourn, a "liberation technology" site, is focused on increasing the participation of people of African descent in computer-mediated communication and in using the technology as a tool in closing distances among all people promoting social and economic justice.

In the AfroAm Family Album, hundreds of people of African descent have written inspiring messages. The Album is related to a discussion group that examines "current events by exploring the complicated intersection of race, class, gender, and culture."

At the Oyez site you can hear the U.S. Supreme Court's grappling with major constitutional cases including *New York Times v. Sullivan*, *Furman v. Georgia*, and *Federal Communications Commission v. Pacifica Foundation*.

The EZLN website, is a wealth of information on the Zapatista uprising and includes communiques, in Spanish, English and German.

Planet Peace, run by Indigenous community organizers and activists, provides a vast array of information focusing on Indigenous and Environmental grassroots initiatives and cultural preservation. The site also includes sound clips of the music and poetry of John Trudell.

Conduct research with WebActive, a comprehensive index of progressive sites.

If all this gets you primed to take to the streets, don't leave home without downloading the National Lawyer's Guild Demonstrator's Manual. I'll see you there!

River Ginchild is the founder of Digital Sojourn. She is a member of the community advisory group of Berkeley Public Library's Internet Project and is an attorney with Legal Services for Prisoner's with Children. The hypertext version of this article can be found at <http://www.digitalsojourn.org/profiles/access.html>.