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The Power of Information and Communities of Color

by Lana W. Jackman and Patricia C. Payne

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In this age of the Information Superhighway, access to information has become a "human rights" issue for communities of color. Access to information is the backbone for economic growth in the world marketplace. Information literacy, the ability to find, evaluate, analyze, and use information effectively is the currency of infinite power and control of one's economic, social, and political destiny. For communities of color to gain access to this phenomenal communications/technological revolution, there is a need to become information literate.

The scramble in the information and communication industry to monopolize the development and dissemination of new technologies demonstrates the high value placed on dominance of the access channels to information. Other than in response to the entertainment factor, i.e. video games, communities of color remain relatively oblivious to the profound, revolutionary impact of the Information Age and its effect on capacities to enhance their social, political, and economic status.

While attention focuses on the media-hyped benefits of the new technologies, access to information in the world marketplace continues to be customized by visionaries who have gone way beyond being charmed by its bells and whistles. In his book *Creating a New Civilization: The Politics of the Third Wave*, Alvin Toffler observes:

> Today we are living through one of these exclamation points in history when the entire structure of human knowledge is once again trembling with changes as old barriers fall. We are just accumulating more facts. Just as we are now restructuring companies and whole economies, we are totally reorganizing the production and distribution of knowledge and the symbols used to communicate it.[1]

These visionaries, the gatekeepers of industry, government, and education, are methodically staking out their information-based power turfs. Efforts by these gatekeepers are underway to design an exclusive communications reality for the 21st century. For example, in 1986 the Cleveland Freenet, a free, open access community computer system was established at Case Western Reserve University. Its chief architects were "doctors, lawyers, educators, community group representatives, and hobbyists" concerned with community access to the Information Superhighway.[2] The entrepreneurial and technical skills necessary to participate in this type of "free" computer network system are not common among communities of color. Systematic representation from communities of color is barely visible in this new, information revolution.

Historically, communities of color have been peripheral to the evolution of technology. This chronology highlights economic, social, and educational influences that have paralleled technological development over half a century.

Dateline: The Age of Information

The following chronology suggests the important events influencing the development of information literacy and its relationship to Communities of Color:

1940's
- Computer developed for military and scientific research purposes only.
- G.I. Bill of Rights broadened public access to post secondary educational opportunities.

1950's
- Television captures America's attention and imagination.
- *Brown v. Board of Education* legalizes the colorization of American education.
- Urban (ghettos) vs. suburban (white flight) societal issues begin to take center stage.
- The launch of Sputnik challenges and threatens the mind of American education.

1960's
- Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message" resonates throughout the American fabric.
- Johnson's "A Great Society" intensifies education's quest for equal opportunity and access.
- ARPANET (United States Advanced Research Projects Agency Network), the pilot INTERNET project is born.
- American society is overwhelmed by the heat of social upheaval and discord; height of the Civil Rights Movement.

1970's
- The birth of the personal computer, Apple, Inc. and IBM, revolutionizes "how business is done" and begins its penetration of the conservative education market.
- The reliance on electronic media by the American public for news and information intensifies.
- The Middle Income Student Assistance Act represents a dramatic shift from the end to the middle of the public's attention regarding the distribution of wealth and America's resources.

1980's
- The INTERNET moves from its embryonic stages into its childhood period; the National Science Foundation (NSFNET) absorbs ARPANET and becomes the backbone of the INTERNET.
- America's educational report card—*A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*—forecasts a bleak future for the educational growth of American manpower.
- The global village begins to take shape with such events as the downing of the Berlin Wall and the break up of the Soviet Union.
- The American Library Association (ALA) commits itself to the promotion of "Information Literacy" and mobilizes librarians across the nation to become educational leaders in the Information Age.

1990's
- INTERNET growing by leaps and bounds; concern mounting over an impending schism between the "haves and have not" of the technological revolution. Access becomes a key social issue.
- Congress creates the National Research Educational Network (NREN), a network infrastructure also known as the Information Superhighway.
- The Gulf War dramatizes the enormous power of electronic media and its impact on all levels of society.

Contemporary issues of access to information bring to mind a prediction made in the early 1970's by the prominent Black educator, Dr. Samuel Proctor. He gave the keynote address at the First National Meeting of Black Students at Predominately White Institutions of Higher Education at MIT. Proctor predicted that if we continued to deal superficially with our educational, social, and political realities and, not only develop, but challenge our intellectual capacity as a people, then look for us to continue to perpetuate our historical legacy as "the bus boys and bus girls of the new space motel in the 21st century." In effect, Dr. Proctor was addressing the issue of empowerment and the need for communities of color to understand that access to *information* is access to *power*.

What does access to information actually mean for communities of color? Why is it so important for communities of color to understand the critical implications of failing to participate actively in this on-going technological revolution? Educator Dr. Lisa Delpit observed, "Let there be no doubt: a 'skilled' minority person who is not also capable of critical analysis becomes the trainable, low-level functionary of dominant society, simply the grease that keeps the institutions which orchestrate his or her oppression running smoothly."[3] Is it the destiny of communities of color to perform as low-level functionaries in this Age of Information as prophesied by Dr. Proctor? At the moment, failure by communities of color to view the ability of thinking critically as paramount in the teaching/learning process portends no other alternative. Until the development of high level, critical thinking skills become central in the minds of those engaged in the teaching/learning process, communities of color will continue to participate in this consistent progression of their oppression.

Historically, communities of color have been peripheral to the evolution of technology.

As we move toward the end of this century, communication technologies embodied in telephone, television, computers, cable, and satellite systems will continue to evolve at a rapid rate and contribute significantly to the vast proliferation of information. In order to sustain even a moderate level of economic success in the next century, an individual must become informationally literate i.e., read, write, think critically, and be technologically literate. Communities of color need to embrace the skills of information literacy for the purposes of life-long learning and economic security. Current research exposes the failure of our educational institutions to focus on the development and integration of these crucial literacy skills in communities of color.[4]

> We believe, in these critical times, that "...... a critical thinker who lacks the 'skills' demanded by employers and institutions of higher learning can aspire to financial and social status only within the disenfranchised world. Yes, if minority people are to effect the change which will allow them to truly progress we must insist on 'skills' within the context of critical and creative thinking."[5]

"Information access, or information literacy, to use the ALA term, will be so vital for the growing cadre of knowledgeable workers and professionals in the coming century; consequently, the challenges information technology poses cut across all academic disciplines and all occupational and professional fields."[6] One must keep in mind that this technological revolution is a world wide phenomena, and one of the major access points to this information is the library. From K-12 to post secondary education, libraries and their media centers are often treated as peripheral to the dynamic of the teaching/learning process. In the United States alone, there are 119,030 libraries of which 92,628 are elementary and secondary school libraries and 4,914 are junior

college/college and university academic libraries. As a result, educational institutions of all types, residing within communities of color, need to be engaged in developing active instructional partnerships between their libraries and our communities. Librarians, as educators, are the informational professionals in this country and many are actively engaged in changing how American society views their role from that of information keeper to that of information provider and educator.

In 1989, the Presidential Committee on Information Literacy of the American Library Association committed itself to promoting information literacy as the vehicle for enhancing the quality of life-long learning for every American. Information literacy is going to require from those of us in education a re-evaluation and subsequent alteration of the teaching and learning skills of all educational professionals. This re-evaluation is critical for ensuring that communities of color have access to the technologies necessary to enhance their information literacy skills. Higher education trains our teachers and trains our librarians. Consequently, it remains one of the major gateways for communities of color to become actively engaged in this exciting, technological revolution. As reported by Lenox and Walker in their article, "Information Literacy in the Educational Process":

> To prepare the leaders of tomorrow, librarians, teachers, resource specialists, and educational administrators of today must teach students to become critical thinkers, intellectually curious observers, creators, and users of information, and citizens who routinely have the desire to know, who know how to access information (yet challenge its validity), who seek corroboration before adopting information, who understand the political, social, and economic agendas of information creation and dissemination and who constantly see, re-see, and re-form information to meet their needs for problem solving and decision making.[7]

Clearly the untapped, intellectual talent of communities of color can be unleashed with the dedication to redesign the core of 21st century educational philosophy; and focus its foundation on the development of higher order critical thinking skills. Higher education institutions, serving as a major gateway to the age of Information Superhighway, must re-examine their educational missions and must be proactive in their efforts to advance the cause of information literacy in communities of color.

Notes

[1] Alvin Toffler and Heidi Toffler, *Creating a New Civilization: The Politics of the Third Wave*. (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1994).

[2] T.M. Grundner, "Free-netting: The Development of Free Public Access Community Computer Systems," *Library Perspectives on NREN*. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1990).

[3] Lisa Delpit, "Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator," *Harvard Educational Review*, November: Vol. 56, No. 4, 1986, 379-385.

[4] Kofi Lomotey (Ed.), *Going to School: The African-American Experience*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1990). See also Scott L. Miller, *An American Imperative: Accelerating Minority Educational Advancement*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) and National Commission of excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983).

[5] Lisa Delpit, "Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator."

[6] K. Green and Stephen Gilbert, "Great Expectations: Content, Communications, Productivity, and the Role of Information Technology in Higher Education," *CHANGE*. March/April, 1995, 8-18.

[7] Mary Lenox and Michael Walker, "Information Literacy in the Educational Process," *The Educational Forum*, 57(3), 1993, 312-324.

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