

Is Black America an Information Community?

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CONCLUSIONS

In this book we have presented a systematic discussion of African Americans' status in the Information Society and addressed some critical issues in determining whether or not Black America *is* an "information community." In our estimation, Black America *is* an information community. Black people are making strides in every dimension of the Information Society that we have examined here. Nevertheless, tremendous challenges face this group in excelling in a rapidly changing, information-based world. Now we turn to some conclusions on this central question and make some recommendations for continuing this line of inquiry.

Our analysis has shown that Blacks are consumers and users of information technology, adopt such technology sometimes at a greater rate than their White counterparts, use the Internet for a variety of purposes, and have concerns about the use of information technology by the majority of the community as a surveillance device to invade their personal privacy. African American women seem to be playing a major role in the technology adoption process in the Black community. African Americans, as stated by *Black Enterprise*, are more sophisticated information technology users than some may have assumed.

While Blacks are consumers and users of information technology, they are facing serious difficulties as owners and controllers of information industries. Political and economic systems that would aid Blacks in this area have been dismantled or failed to improve the Black ownership profile. The African American newspaper faces a decline in its utility and certain demise if it does not use its economic strength to adopt new information technologies and systems. African American newspapers are slow to adopt the systems that majority newspapers have put into place. With the recent sale of radio and television stations by Black broadcasters, the direction of ownership and control of broadcasting by African Americans has changed. A few years ago, Black

ownership was small but increasing; as the information age goes into full swing, Black ownership is even smaller and diminishing. One of the positive outlooks for the Information Society is that new industries and business opportunities will form because of the proliferation of new technologies. One could assume that new industries that will open up will provide African Americans new opportunities to control emerging information industries. African American Personal Communication Services (PCS) businesses formed recently as a result of auctions of spectrum space by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) are a case in point. The *Adarand* decision and other political moves are limiting the participation of Blacks in new information businesses.

Blacks are also facing a critical challenge in gaining the jobs in which information and knowledge are created, and Black educational institutions do not have the resources to produce Black information professionals. Training African Americans to move from information-processing and distribution occupations to those that involve the creation of information and knowledge may be one of the greatest challenges to this community in the next few decades.

As the world of work concentrates on the production and distribution of information, Blacks are poorly represented in research and development, mass media, and other high-end information professions. At the same time, Blacks are concentrated in greater proportions in positions such as post office workers and information machine operators than they are represented in the society in information processing and distribution.

Accessing major computing networks for the purpose of solving social problems is fundamental to participation in the Information Society. As the world moves toward electronic politics, accessing networks becomes tantamount to political participation. While Blacks are becoming more and more computer-literate and making their presence felt in cyberspace, they do not have the computing access of their White counterparts. This problem is being dealt with in programs and activities all over the nation, but these efforts are relatively small.

Information technology has put great power into the hands of African Americans to produce images and messages about African American culture. Moreover, it provides the opportunity for unified messages to emanate from Blacks around the world. This technology could change the negative portrayal of Blacks in this country and across the globe. Some steps are being taken in this direction in America and the diaspora as well as in Africa, but the problems are great and difficult to overcome.

In every era of development in this nation, African Americans have been actors in the dramatic changes that have taken place in America. The current era is no different. The editors of *Black Enterprise* summarized it this way in their March 1998 issue: "For African Americans especially, the Information Age is a time of great promise. 'The impending information and telecommunications revolution is possibly our best chance to become masters and creators of our

own destiny,' says Technology editor Tariq K. Muhammad. 'We were locked out of opportunities during the Industrial Revolution by racism. This time, the only thing that will hold us back is our own lack of foresight'" (p. 13).

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are three areas in which recommendations for the assessment of Blacks' prosperity in the Information Society must be considered: political, economic, and scholarly. Black political leaders should form a global agenda for establishing policies that will aid Blacks in gaining a strong foothold in the Information Society. Reversing policies that are currently working against African American ownership and control of information industries, for example, should be at the top of such an agenda.

Corporate leaders should find ways to work with Black colleges and universities and school systems to help them obtain resources to train information professionals and intelligent consumers and users of information technology. The Black community has many hurdles to overcome to be a strong player in the Information Society. But information technology innovations offer this community great opportunities to excel. Information research and policy institutes should be established in the Black community to provide policy initiatives that support and assist African Americans in their efforts to prosper and achieve excellence in the twenty first century.

THE FINAL WORD

The Black community is not a one-dimensional sector of American society. To unilaterally state that Blacks are falling through the Net or being left behind is inaccurate and irresponsible. While this view seems to receive a lot of attention in the media, we find that the picture is much more complex than that. Blacks are not only using the Internet for a variety of purposes, but using it to conduct business. Not only are many Blacks using telephones, but they are also contributing huge sums of money in long-distance and other fees that are helping to finance the construction of the information infrastructures. At the same time, the Black community is a sector of society that is struggling to achieve parity with other communities in the Information Society. In this area, it may need assistance from those in the majority society. Those who observe and measure its progress in the years to come should view the Black community in this way. This book hopefully is a helpful tool in that regard.