Liberation and Domination: Understanding the Digital Divide from the Standpoint of the 'Other'

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I present the competing perspectives of the digital divide that emerged from a study of African American inner city residents participating in a community technology center. A critical analysis of the participants' narratives about information technology and the digital divide was carried out. This analysis was informed by feminist standpoint theory, which posits that groups sharing a common location within hierarchical power structures also share collective experiences. The results demonstrate that participants viewed the digital divide from racial and class standpoints, and envisioned information technology as both liberating and dominating. These dual perspectives are used to identify policy implications for redressing the digital divide.

INTRODUCTION

In his Audubon address in 1964, Malcolm X offered the now famous line "We didn't land on Plymouth Rock; the rock landed on us." And in many respects, information technology (IT) has landed like a digital rock on economically oppressed inner cities. The US Department of Commerce (2002) has argued that a massive infusion of computers and broadband Internet connections into homes, schools, libraries and other neighborhood institutions may signal a closing of the digital divide. However, simply promoting access and basic training to improve the computer skills of marginalized individuals does not address the social forces that may limit these actions in the first place.

Prematurely proclaiming the closure of the digital divide may in fact monopolize a dominant ideology that socially constructs IT as an apolitical, unstoppable, and downright irresistible part of a common American culture. Privileged groups can safely imagine that IT is value neutral since the power they have traditionally asserted over inner city residents accord them the right to control the interpretation and reception of IT. From this perspective, the only problem is that some populations have been excluded from access and training.

This type of reasoning, however, fails to consider that inner city residents have been historically underserved in their quality of employment, degree of qualifications, level of income and education, and opportunities for consumption. The social inequalities that these disparities entail are longstanding and continue to cloud what could be an exhilarating moment for mankind (Postman 1992; Schiller 1996). Castells (1989), for instance, uses the term 'informational city' to describe emergent forms and processes of sociospatial segregation that polarize highly valued groups on the one hand, and devalued groups on the other. 'Unskilled and uninformed populations' have become threatened with social and economic irrelevance, and have become isolated in inner cities (Wilson 1996). Scarce opportunities exist to overcome the vicious cycle of poverty, illiteracy, sporadic work, racial and ethnic discrimination, and criminal activity. In the informational city, IT becomes a contemporary mechanism for reproducing and deepening social structures and power relations (Moolenkropf and Castells 1991).

The digital divide, therefore, should not be explained as a gap in physical access to computers and the Internet, but rather as a political outcome rooted in historical systems of power and privilege (Patterson and Wilson 2000; Kvasny and Keil 2002). One question that emerges then is how do inner city residents make sense of the digital divide? To address this question, I offer the accounts of African American inner city residents participating in a community technology initiative. Through their narratives, I work to present the coexisting and directly competing points of view. While some informants assumed a standpoint that viewed IT as a tool for liberation, others believed that IT was a tool for domination. Informed by these rival narratives, the paper concludes with a set of policy implications that arise when the digital divide is examined from the perspective of the 'Other'.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE 'OTHER'

According to hooks (1995), to be objectified as the 'Other' is to be systematically subjugated by 'white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal values' which maintain the oppression of African American women and other diverse peoples. Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of an independent consciousness in the oppressed can be taken to mean that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization (Friere 1970).

Cheng (1997) argues that the institution of white supremacy requires diverse people to assimilate into the dominant group's values, aesthetics and attitudes, at the expense of negating their own unique cultural values. Grunell and Saharso (1999) caution that assimilation can lead to the development of a 'colonized mind', a mind that is restricted in its ability to question and transform existing systems of domination. Assimilation can also play a critical role in maintaining the invisibility of subjugated people and their ideas, and in structuring the patterned relations of race, gender, and class inequality that pervade the entire social structure (Hill-Collins 1990).

With respect to the digital divide, white supremacist ideologies come into play when people comfortable in and with IT unwittingly invest in the sense of IT as mystery. Marginalized groups are often reduced to abstractions and objects born out of the fantasies and insecurities of privileged members of society (West 1994; Fine 1998). Subjugated populations are typically believed to lack recognition, appreciation and understanding of the relevance of IT for their life situations. These types of fundamental assumptions conspire in the social construction of subjugated people as 'have nots', 'target communities', 'the Other'. Consequently, as the purveyors of knowledge, it is the job of the dominant to enlighten and demystify the Other by controlling their interpretations and receptions of IT.

The fact that inner city residents think critically about the digital divide and their relative position in the social hierarchy breaks the supposition that the Other lacks the capacity to comprehend and to embrace IT. Feminist standpoint theory provides a lens for understanding the ways in which inner city residents interpret and self-define IT and the digital divide.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Data Collection

In this study, I draw upon the narratives that emerged from a study of low-income African Americans participating in a community technology center located in an inner city. Unstructured interviews were conducted with participants to explore their life histories, and their perspectives on IT and the digital divide. These unstructured interviews were carried out over an eight-month period, and generally took the form of informal conversations in the break room, classrooms and labs.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was informed by feminist standpoint theory which is an interpretive framework dedicated to explaining how knowledge remains central to maintaining and changing unjust systems of power (Hill-Collins 1997). Standpoint theory is rooted in the power/knowledge framework that focuses on shared group experiences, history, and location in relation to power hierarchies. Standpoint theorists argue that collective experiences and histories lend a particular kind of sense making to a person's lived experience (Caraway 1991; Harding 1997; hooks 2000; Hill-Collins 1998).

Feminist standpoint theorists advocate for using people's everyday lives as a foundation for constructing knowledge and as a basis for criticizing dominant knowledge claims. The use of standpoint perspectives in organizational studies can help to increase knowledge, identify missing constructs, develop new relationships among concepts, and build more comprehensive theory (Allen 1996).   Lived experiences of members of subjugated groups can also help to respond to criticisms that organizational research generally ignores the issue of race (Nmoko 1992) and social class (Cheng 1997).

Interpreting the Results

Historically underserved groups and individuals without access to IT critically assess the digital divide from a standpoint where IT is a privileged signifier. The participants in this study generally conceptualized the digital divide in two competing and contradictory ways.   For some, IT signified hope and liberation; for others, IT signified pessimism and domination.

Liberation: "New Tools for Hope for the Future"

Many informants ascribed emancipatory power to IT. They believe in the possibility of upward mobility and collective progress enabled by IT. Even though they suffered in their daily lives, they also let themselves believe that times were changing. In this shared worldview, IT is highly prized as a mechanism for social advancement and inclusion in the information society. As one classroom facilitator states, "These people are coming here because they are hungry. They want to learn."

Beverly, a senior participating in the program, uses several metaphors that suggest movement – "the first step", "no longer left behind", and "the Internet is the mode of travel".   Overcoming the digital divide is seen as an ascent along "the road of information freedom" that enables Black people to flee from the oppressive and menacing conditions of the inner city and to keep despair at bay. Developing IT skills is part of a larger struggle for wholeness and resilience.

Beverly: Through this program we are taking computer classes that have connected us with the great information divide, we are no longer left behind. We started our journey on January 8, 2001. We are still traveling on the road of information freedom and enjoying every minute of it. There is so much to be learned, and the information is available because we made the first step, receiving information and taking the steps to change our future in the usage of the computer in our everyday life. We now realize that the Internet is the mode of travel for today as well as tomorrow.

Ron, an adult male participant, juxtaposes "darkness" and "light" to construct a definition of the digital divide. He talks about a "growing divide among peers", and feeling "so left behind" due to his lack of IT skills. For him, redressing the digital divide is about "feeling connected" and "being part of what's going on". His desire is focused on connecting with people and institutions outside of his local community.

Ron: Technology is the thing of the future. My nieces and nephews tell me that I need to step it up some, so this is my first move to get out of the dark and into the light…I want to be more a part of what's going on. I want to feel connected…I was in the dark. Before I learned about the computers, it was hard to communicate with people. Without computer training, there will be a growing divide among peers. It is getting larger. I felt so left behind, out of it. I was not in the loop for communication. I had no email, so I couldn't keep in touch with my family on a regular basis. I had to use the phone. Now with email, I can communicate on a regular basis. It is also less expensive.

Another informant, Sean, believes that "conquering" the digital divide should be part of a broader "mission" aimed at improving the economic survival of not only individuals but entire classes of poor people.

Sean: I will learn a lot of computer applications when I finish this class. I will be able to get a better job and better opportunities. I will conquer the digital divide. We all need to learn these computer applications. We will need this information to be successful in the business world. Afro-Americans have basically been left behind in this arena. We must make progress. The [community technology center] will help us to accomplish this mission.

Like Sean, Rose spoke from the standpoint of race and class to describe how IT has not been "prevalent in our community" because computers are unaffordable and intimidating. Her narrative also punctuates the need for the community to invest in and engage with IT. Rose not only saw the potential for community activism through technology education. She advised "those who have the ability to train" to "provide others with computer skills". Moreover, this learning should occur in a "comfortable setting".

Rose: There is definitely a digital divide in the area of technology when it comes to African-Americans mainly because many people cannot afford to obtain their own personal computers, and access to computer training have not been prevalent in our communities. Additionally, our older generations tend to feel intimidated by computer technology. It has become the responsibility of those who have the ability to train and provide others with computer skills to do so in a comfortable setting.

Participants such as Sean, Ron, Rose and Beverly, acknowledge the social and economic potential of IT. For them, redressing the digital divide has an urgency that goes beyond self-improvement and demystification. IT is perceived as a liberator of oppressed people. "People come in and pick up this spirit. It can't be measured in terms of money. We have to raise awareness and then it is boundless to where people can go." These individuals are not content to point out the source of their oppression. Instead they urged African Americans within the community to become active, self-reliant and independent.

Domination: "Technology Becomes a Nightmare for Us"

A few participants, however, believed that "technology becomes a nightmare for us". They spoke primarily from class-based standpoints that informed their narratives of IT and the digital divide. Yet, their pointed critiques of IT lacked a sense of activism or power to change unjust social structures. For these participants, IT was viewed as a contemporary mechanism for reproducing inequality.

Bill, for instance, expressed his views on why the government was now implementing digital divide initiatives. In his critique, he seeks to explain the benefits that accrue to the government for having a technologically educated population.

Bill: The plan was to perfect the technology with the rich people. Then when it is perfected it can be rolled out to the masses. The way to do this is to fund programs. The goal is to make us continue to make us buy things. They have to train us so that we can continue to buy. They also have to keep us in the workforce to avoid chaos. If too many people are not working, they will end up on welfare or in prisons. The rich people will have to foot the bill. They need low skilled people to keep the economy going, so they don't need to train us for the high paying jobs. It's all about economics, not humanity.

While Bill critiques the interests of the rich that underlie the formation of the community technology center, there is no sense of resistance or collective struggle against the established social order. Instead, Bill portrays "the masses" as naïve consumers at the mercy of producers that conspire to "make us continue to buy". The potential of IT as a tool to support grassroots organizing and community development is not explored. From Bill's perspective, the digital divide has much to do with being dominated and silenced. Established power structures and dominant ideologies effectively determine what people will receive computer training, and the conditions imposed on their use of IT (Kvasny and Keil 2002).

Roger, an adult participant, is faced with a similar dilemma. On the one hand, he would like to engage in IT training activities. On the other hand, he has generations of history to draw from which attest to the fact that wholehearted participation in education programs may not deliver on its promise of an enhanced quality of life (Gorard and Selwyn 1999).

Roger: I don't expect much. I'm not here to get a job because I know that I am not learning enough. I am just getting a taste for technology. They keep raising the bar. Now you need to know more just to get an entry-level job. History tells me that this is the case. There is really nothing new about the technology.

Roger's pessimistic reading of the benefits that he will derive from IT training is informed by his class position. According to Brown (1974, p. 15) "Class involves your behavior, your basic assumptions about life. Your experience (determined by your class) validates those assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and from others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, act." Individuals such as Bill and Roger reproduce inequality by adopting the limited roles assigned to them by virtue of their membership in a subjugated class group.

IMPLICATIONS

In a world where people have multidimensional goals, all constrained within economic and social limits, policy interventions tend to improve and document the success of that one dimension, while ignoring the dimensions sacrificed. Most digital divide policy solutions to date have focused on the technical dimension of access. Substantially less attention has been paid to overcoming the societal structures that limit the social strivings of individuals who believe in the promise of IT, but are structurally barred from achieving their goals (Norris 2000).

The key policy implication derived from this study is the need to support not only the diffusion of the IT artifact, but to also support the hopes, aspirations and points of view of underserved groups. The digital divide will not be bridged with the delivery of computers, networks and other technology artifacts. Bridging the digital divide requires that we also deliver on the visionary ideologies and opportunity structures that we tend to associate with IT. Instead of imposing the meanings of the dominant, we should engage in dialogue with dominated groups in order to understand their perspectives, needs and desires. The learning that takes place through democratic dialogues can then inform the development of socially just and culturally relevant programs and stable local institutions that assist subjugated people in the use of IT to more fully realize their life chances.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides a micro-level analysis of how the digital divide is experienced and expressed through the narratives of African American inner city residents. I found that most informants saw themselves as agents of social change, not victims. They largely believed in the complex and transcendent nature of IT. However, calling upon inner city populations to be change agents only makes sense if we also look at the history, culture and social structures in which their agency is to be exerted (Sowell 1994; West 1994).

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