Chapter 71

The Evolving Discourse of the Digital Divide:
The Internet, Black Identity, and the Evolving Discourse of the Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we examine how people of African descent are using an online discussion forum as a site for interrogating the existential question of "who am I?" Contrary to the typical formulations of the digital divide as a measure of disparity in access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), we make a case for how and why ICTs are being effectively used to enable and advance the interests of people who have historically been marginalized and silenced. The contributions of this research extend the digital divide discourse to affirm the cultural realities of diverse Internet users.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the potential benefits of Internet use, research on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the African Diaspora typically starts from a digital divide thesis in which this population is viewed as lacking access and relevant skills to make use of the Internet. The

digital divide was initially defined as a lack of physical access to computing devices necessary to obtain Internet access (National Telecommunications and Information Agency, 1995). The divide was subsequently formulated to include concerns related to disparities in information literacy and skills necessary to function proficiently on the Internet (Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003). One consistent concern was that globally, people of African descent residing in both developing

and in developed nations were on the wrong side of the divide and at risk of falling behind their online peers.

In the decade since the digital divide gained popularity, people of African descent have increasingly adopted the Internet. In African countries, Internet penetration rates increased ten-fold over the course of four years, going from 4 countries (in 1993) to 44 countries with Internet access (in 1997). By 2000 the Internet was accessible to all 54 countries and far exceeded the penetration rate of the telephone in Africa (Sonaike, 2004). Additionally, among African Americans, the percentage of households with broadband connections in the United States (US) has increased 186% from 2005 (14%) to 2007 (40%; Horrigan, 2007). As gaps in access and use narrow, early formulations of the digital divide that framed people of African descent as deficient are challenged. This chapter is an addition to the body of literature that currently challenges this notion.

This chapter supports the objectives of this book through its exploration of the digital divide and its relationship with the Internet use of diasporic people. In this chapter, we explore this phenomenon at the individual and group level using textual analysis of discussion forum posts. We use identity theory to examine how identity is (re) constructed online in a community of indigenous and diasporic Africans. Our analysis addresses two research questions:

1. What labels are used (e.g. African American, Black, Negro) as community members negotiate their identity?
2. What social meanings are ascribed to those labels?

In the following section, we provide background information on diasporas and the digital divide. We then discuss the Internet and identity theory as a means of understanding the issues related to identity performance online. Next the research methodology and results of our textual analysis are presented. The chapter will then conclude with a brief discussion of future trends and a brief summary of the chapter's contents and purpose.

BACKGROUND

In a seminal book on identity and the Internet, Turkle (1995) suggests that identity on the Internet is more fluid and fragmented than real space because people can assume multiple identities. However, research on Chinese (Sun, 2002) and Indian (Mitra, 2001) diasporas reports that these communities use the Internet as a "cultural location" to enact identity positions online that are grounded in real life. These online diasporic people share memories of historical events of their respective nations, and reconcile their sense of displacement, multiplicity and fragmentation in real life.

Diaspora refers to categories of people such as expatriates, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic minorities who are dispersed from their homelands but maintain myths or memories about their country of origin (Safran, 1991). For Clifford (1994) diaspora cultures mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering or desiring another place. While scholars such as Clifford (1994) and Safran (1991) express a sense of loss and separation from home identity, diasporas have also come to represent a postmodern experience in which home and identity have become fluid concepts. The postmodern notion of 'belonging nowhere' or 'belonging everywhere' suggests freedom and new possibilities of identity formation and notions of belonging.

Regardless of whether diasporic people express identity through the prism of loss or new possibilities, immigrants are often placed in the lower ranks of the social hierarchy in the host country. Host societies also tend to subjugate the diasporas' native cultural practices such as language and

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