

CYBERSPACE AND RACE

In Cyberspace, nobody knows your race unless you tell them. Do you tell?" Several years ago, I put this slogan on a poster advertising an MIT-hosted public forum about race and digital space. The resulting controversy was an eyeopener.

Like many white liberals, I had viewed the absence of explicit racial markers in cyberspace with some optimism—seeing the emerging “virtual communities” as perhaps our best hope ever of achieving a truly color-blind society.

But many of the forum’s minority participants—both panelists and audience members—didn’t experience cyberspace as a place where nobody cared about race. Often, they’d found that people simply assumed all participants in an online discussion were white unless they identified themselves otherwise. One Asian American talked of having a white online acquaintance e-mail him a racist joke, which he would never have sent if he had known the recipient’s race. Perhaps covering up for his own embarrassment, the white acquaintance had accused the Asian-American man of “trying to pass as white.”

Even when more than one minority was present in a chat room, the forum participants said, they didn’t recognize each other as such, leaving each feeling stranded in a segregated neighborhood. If they sought to correct ignorant misperceptions in online discussions, they were accused of “bringing race into the conversation.”

Such missteps were usually not the product of overt racism. Rather, they reflected the white participants’ obliviousness about operating in a multiracial context.

Perhaps when early white Netizens were arguing that cyberspace was “color-blind,” what they really meant was that they desperately wanted a place where they didn’t have to think about, look at or talk about racial differences. Unfortunately, none of us knows how to live in a race-free society. As Harvard University law professor Lani Guinier explains, “We don’t live next door to each other. We don’t go to school together. We don’t even watch the same television shows.” Computers may break down some of the hold of traditional geography on patterns of communication, but we won’t overcome that history of segregation by simply wishing it away. And as the Web culture becomes more globalized, it will only get more complicated.

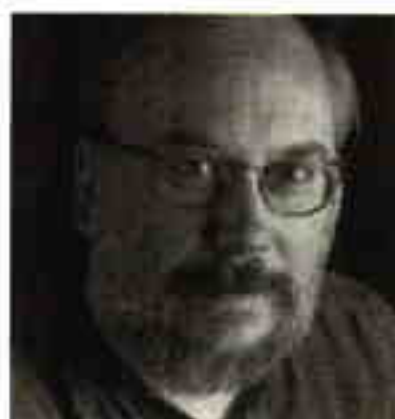
So far, these topics have entered the national conversation through talk about the so-called digital divide, the gap between white and minority, rich and poor, in computer access and use. Such talk often assumes that if we combat the technological and economic problems of access, cyberspace will become more democratic. I do hope governmental and corporate resources are brought to bear on the problem, but equal access is not the same as equal participation. Giving everybody broadband is a problem of a very different order than broadening our minds.

When art museums lower economic barriers, offering free or reduced admission, they still attract mostly white upper-

middle-class patrons; many lower-income and minority citizens don’t feel entitled to attend. Where museums have successfully diversified their communities, it has been through educational outreach and collaboration with minority communities. Efforts to bridge the digital divide must internalize these lessons.

Some have argued that class, rather than race, may be the strongest indicator of who has access—though we need to recognize that in a society where the average black family income is roughly half that of the average white family income, race and class are not easily separable. It is hard to imagine universal computer literacy in a country that has yet to ensure that all citizens can read and write—and again, there is a strong correlation between race, class and literacy rates.

There are some hopeful signs that racially based gaps in access are closing: for example, Hispanic Americans are the fastest-growing population online. As minority groups have developed more economic clout, cyberspace has started to seem less racially segregated. Yet this may only take us so far. Bridging the digital divide needs to mean more than allowing corpora-



People talk about bridging the digital divide by making technology more accessible to all, but giving everybody broadband is a problem of a very different order than broadening our minds.

tions access to new markets; it needs to include empowering minority citizens to participate in online policy debates.

Most digital-divide rhetoric depicts a world where undereducated, undermotivated and underemployed minorities are competing against technologically sophisticated whites. Many scholars and activists contend that such talk may intensify the cultural barriers to full participation and thus become a self-fulfilling prophecy. They argue that we need to be focusing on success stories, examining those projects—whether activist, entrepreneurial or educational in origin—that have significantly increased access, visibility and participation within minority communities. Our children need to know about the ways that minorities have been technological innovators rather than seeing them as constantly lagging behind.

In the end, we will need to give up any lingering fantasies of a color-blind Web and focus on building a space where we recognize, discuss and celebrate racial and cultural diversity. To achieve that goal, all of us—white folks and people of color—will have to shed the defensiveness that surrounds the topic of race. Many are experimenting with new ground rules and modes of communication that enable us to explore the potential of digital technology to bring together people who would historically have never had contact and encourage them to compare notes, test assumptions and overcome ignorance and stereotyping. Out of such conversations might come practical approaches for combating racism, not only online, but off. ■