

Falling for the Gap

Whatever happened to the "digital divide"?

By Adam Clayton Powell III

The New York Jets have just won the Super Bowl. It must be true: There's a story on the front page of *The New York Times*, and there are color pictures in *Sports Illustrated*. And indeed it is true. Or, rather, it *was* true, a few decades ago. Only a truly inexperienced sports writer would suggest that the New York Jets are the *current* champions of the NFL.

Did you hear that the Dow Jones industrial average has topped 1,000? That, too, is old news, as even the most junior financial writer must know.

How about this one: There is a broad and widening gap on the Internet between white and minority Americans. This familiar claim, often asserted as a fact by policy makers and digerati alike, is also based on old information. Reinforced by White House press releases and presidential candidates' speeches, the idea is so ubiquitous that even the usually well-informed have come to believe that white Americans are online and minorities are not.

Not so. It may have been true in 1996 or 1997, when the Internet was only a few years old as a popular medium and personal computers cost thousands of dollars. But today, with dirt-cheap Internet access and computers approaching the costs of television sets, assertions of a "digital divide" or "racial ravine" are as correct as identifying Joe Namath as football's current MVP or pinning last week's Dow at 1,000.

Misled by stereotypes, misinformed about survey techniques, and misdirected by interest

groups, the media have treated the "digital divide" as a crisis requiring government intervention. As a result, billions of dollars might be spent to address needs that no longer exist.

To understand how this happened, start with stereotypes. East Coast journalists typically equate "minority" with "African American," portraying the country as divided between black and white. This view omits the fastest growing minority group, Hispanic Americans, who in just a few years will be the largest minority group in the country.

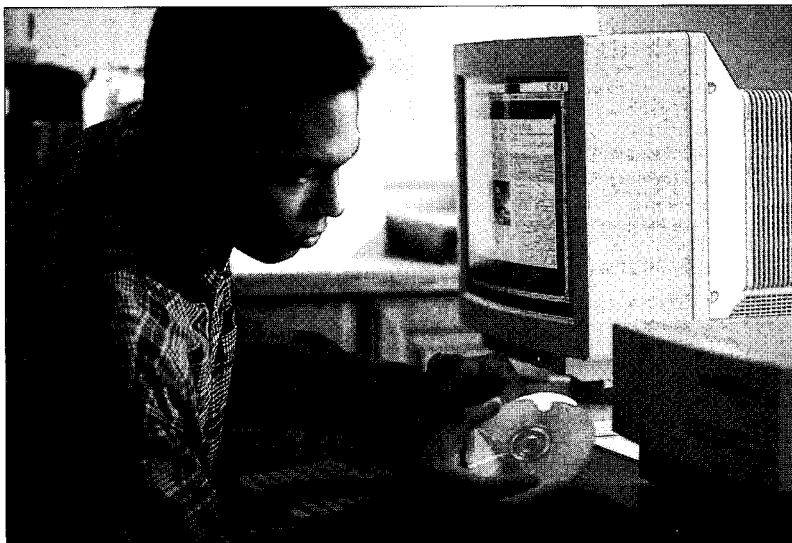
Confusing "minority" with "African American" also leads journalists and analysts to forget that it is not among whites but among Asian Americans that Internet and computer use are approaching levels of penetration comparable to those of the telephone, television, and indoor plumbing. So even using the old survey data, it was always inaccurate to claim that minor-

ity Americans were not online in large numbers.

But the issue of dated information is crucial, especially because a year or two in "Internet time" is the equivalent of a decade for older media. The findings of the most frequently cited "digital divide" study, released last summer by the U.S. Department of Commerce, were presented and widely reported as new information. The study was actually an analysis of surveys in 1998 and earlier. When it was released, more-current information was already available from market research firms, but only a handful of news organizations reported the newer data.

The Commerce Department study made page one headlines with its conclusion that the United States faced a "racial ravine" dividing online white Americans from information-poor minorities. "For many groups, the digital divide has widened as the information 'haves' outpace the 'have nots' in gaining access to electronic resources," it said. "Between 1997 and 1998, the divide between those at the highest and lowest education levels increased 25 percent, and the divide between those at the highest and lowest income levels grew 29 percent."

That sounds impressive, but if you look more closely you may spot a crucial methodological flaw. Among reporters for the major daily newspapers, only John Schwartz of *The Washington Post* noted the problem. "Last year's study did not collect information about out-of-home access," wrote Schwartz. "It is not possible, therefore, to say whether the digital divide is growing based on access from all places." In other words, the Commerce Department's claim of a "widened" gap was not supported by the data it cited, because the surveys asked different



Digital Doubts: The most recent data dispel notions of a computer "racial ravine" requiring government intervention.

questions from year to year.

"We never stated that we have any information about widening with regard to anywhere access," says Larry Irving, who directed the government study before he resigned as assistant secretary of commerce. "But certainly we can prove the in-home access gap is widening."

Yet according to every survey taken in the last few years, Americans get their online access at work and at school in far larger numbers than at home. According to *The Internet News Audience Goes Ordinary*, a 1999 report from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 62 percent of employed Americans go online through their jobs, and 75 percent of students go online from their schools. The Commerce Department study reported only on use of personally owned computers, thus excluding the millions of users (including this writer) who are online every day but do not own a computer. This is like assuming you don't need a driver's license unless you buy a car.

Regardless of whether the questions in the federal survey were correctly phrased, they were asked in 1998. Surveys conducted this year have found not only that minorities are not falling behind but that they are catching up.

"If you missed Christmas [1998], you missed a big surge," says Ekaterina Walsh, author of *The Digital Melting Pot*, a report based on 1999 data collected by Forrester Research of Cambridge, Massachusetts. "Quite a lot of people got cheap PCs. We were surprised ourselves, because we were projecting lower numbers for online penetration and commerce [than the study found]. Even a month made a big difference." Walsh adds that the federal report may undercount or ignore WebTV, which in 1998 was one of the lowest-priced devices enabling consumers to go online.

"I think we did miss a certain amount of information with regard to lower-priced PCs since December," concedes Irving, the former Commerce Department official. But he stands firm on the question of whether the department's study was misleading because it tracked only computer use at home. "No one has been tracking out-of-home access, as far as we know," he says.

Larry Irving, meet Bob Mancuso. Man-

LIBERTY ISN'T FREE

Its price is eternal vigilance.

Over 13,000 Cato Sponsors are willing to pay the price of liberty. Cato Sponsors make annual tax-deductible contributions ranging from \$50 to \$5,000 or more, advancing the American experiment in limited government and individual liberty and entitling them to receive Cato's outstanding Policy Analysis series and other publications.

Should you be a Cato Sponsor?

**CATO
INSTITUTE**

1000 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001 • (202) 842-0200 • Cato@Cato.org

TYRANTS & TOOLS

**BILL, ATOMIC
SECRETS ARE
NOT ENOUGH!**

**YOU MUST FOIL THE
RUNNING-DOG
CAPITALISTS OF THE
REPUBLICAN
LIBERTY CAUCUS!**



**YES, O
BENEVOLENT ONE!
HMM...MAYBE HILLARY
CAN CHECK THEIR
FBI FILES!**



REPUBLICAN LIBERTY CAUCUS

**1-800-752-9646 www.rlc.org email:rlc@rlc.org
611 Pennsylvania Ave. SE #370 Washington, DC 20003**

cuso, marketing manager for Nielsen Media Research in New York, says his firm produces a regular report on out-of-home Internet access and use. Forrester Research also provides tracking data on out-of-home use.

The Orlando Sentinel was one of the few newspapers that noted the problem with focusing exclusively on Internet use at home. The *Sentinel* also reported inconsistencies among the 1994, 1997, and 1998 federal surveys, noting that the earlier surveys did not even ask specifically about computer ownership; they asked whether respondents owned a *modem*. *Sentinel* reporter Maria Padilla also quoted comments from Walsh and other researchers challenging the government's conclusions. "Race has nothing to do with whether you adopt technology or not," Walsh told Padilla.

Donna Hoffman, an associate professor of management at Vanderbilt University who studies Internet access and popularized the term *digital divide*, says racial differences do indeed disappear when you measure access and use, rather than modem or computer ownership. "We do not find gaps in usage, given access," Hoffman says. But she defends the federal study because, however shaky its conclusions, it could have an impact on the policy debate, encouraging government spending on computers for poor people (a policy that Irving also favors). "Getting PCs into the

the data show a digital divide for those time points. The data also allow us to understand the likely impact of policy initiatives."

There is no shortage of those initiatives. Within hours of the federal report's release, President Clinton, Vice President Gore, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the National Urban League all announced programs to buy computers for minority Americans.

But the recent data from Forrester and Nielsen suggest that such programs may be misdirected. According to Forrester, Hispanic Americans were slightly ahead of white Americans in computer use earlier this year, and African Americans were closing the black-white gap at a rate that could lead to parity within the next 12 months. In terms of Internet use, the truly disadvantaged may well be Native Americans, who were not covered by the federal report. Data from the Black College Communication Association and other sources also indicate disparities between educational institutions, including lower Internet access at predominantly minority colleges and universities. This, too, was lost in the focus on home computer ownership.

"Questions of colored folk and cyberspace are often plagued by overstatements of the bad news, understatements of the

rent rates of usage but rather [what are] the current rates of adoption."

Wasow cites the history of another electronic medium. "We forget that once upon a time televisions were a rare and expensive device that only a few households were lucky enough to possess, and now every home has nearly a TV per person," he says. "Over time, most advanced technologies that are available only to an elite few become widely dispersed among the broader population."

In other words, there is no debate about the television-rich vs. the television-poor in America. Every American who wants one has a television set. And now that some personal computers cost less than TVs and Internet access is cheaper than cable (or even free), the data do indeed show that every American who wants one is getting a PC.

But the media echo chamber has drowned out updated information with old studies and stereotypes. Even informed technology observers have mistaken last summer's federal report for current information. In the cover story for the August issue of *Yahoo Internet Life* magazine, Farai Chideya of ABC News wrote that "the average Web user is different from the average American: more likely to be white or Asian...and less likely to be Latino, black or a blue collar worker." Her source? That Commerce Department report, based on interviews in 1998.

"Although middle-class blacks and other minorities are getting online in substantial numbers, there remains an enormous disparity between whites' computer use and blacks'," wrote the usually perceptive Internet observer Jon Katz in a late-summer column on the Freedom Forum Web site. His source? The new edition of the widely respected book *Technology and the Future*, edited by Albert Teich, the director of science and policy programs at the American Association for the Advancement of Science. And what was the book's source? The Commerce Department study. So Mayor Giuliani, where's the ticker-tape parade for Joe Namath? ♦

Adam Clayton Powell III (apowell@alum.mit.edu) is vice president of technology and programs at the Freedom Forum (www.freedomforum.org).

The media echo chamber has drowned out updated information with old studies and stereotypes. Even informed technology observers have mistaken last summer's federal report for current information.

homes of all Americans is critical," she argues.

Hoffman concedes that the research by Nielsen and Forrester, using 1999 data, was more current than her studies and the federal government's, which were based on data from 1998 or earlier. But she says older data are still useful. "We track events over time the better to understand the evolution in access and usage," she says. "We have learned an enormous amount about technology usage by carefully studying these events over time. The fact is that

good news, and misplaced concern about the importance of computers," says Omar Wasow, an MSNBC commentator and founder of BlackPlanet.com and other black-oriented Web sites. "For example, a few years ago people were concerned that women were dramatically underrepresented on the Internet. Yet because women were signing up at America Online and other access providers at an incredible clip, in a few short years women have practically achieved parity in their online access.... The critical statistic is not what are the cur-

Taking It to the Streets

Why treating guns like cars might not be such a bad idea.

By David B. Kopel

Should we treat guns like cars? Handgun Control Inc. has been saying so for years, and this summer Vice President Al Gore agreed. "We require a license to drive a car in this nation in order to keep unsafe drivers off the road," Gore said. "As president, I will fight for a national requirement that every state issue photo licenses [for handgun buyers]. We should require a license to own a handgun so people who shouldn't have them can't get them." Prospective licensees should have to "pass a background test and pass a gun safety test." Gore predicted that his plan would cause the gun lobby to "have a fit."

Actually, if Gore follows through on his promise to treat guns like cars, he will oversee the most massive decontrol of firearms in America since 1868, when the 14th Amendment abolished the Southern states' Black Codes, which prevented freedmen from owning guns. Although anti-gun lobbyists who use the car analogy are pushing for additional controls, laws that really did treat guns like cars would be much less restrictive, on the whole, than what we have now.

The first thing to go would be the 1986 federal ban on the manufacture of machine guns for sale to ordinary citizens. We don't ban cars like Porsches just because they are high-powered and can drive much faster than the speed limit. Even though it's a lot easier to go 50 miles per hour over the highway speed limit in a Porsche than in a Hyundai, we let people own any car they want, no matter what its potential for abuse.

After getting rid of the machine gun ban, the next step toward treating cars like guns would be repealing the 1994 federal "assault weapon" ban and its analogs in California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and a few other jurisdictions. So-called assault weapons are actually ordinary guns that

fire just one bullet each time the trigger is pressed, but they happen to look like machine guns. Just as we don't ban powerful Porsches (which actually can go very fast), we don't ban less-powerful vehicles that simply look like high-performance cars.

Likewise, we don't ban autos because they are underpowered, or because they're made with low-quality metal. If you want a Yugo, you can buy one. So the state-level bans on inexpensive guns (a.k.a. "junk guns" or "Saturday night specials") will have to go, along with the federal rules against the import of cheap guns.

Also slated for elimination under the treat-cars-like-guns rule are thousands of laws regulating the purchase of firearms and their possession on private property. The simple purchase of an automobile is subject to essentially no restrictions. When you show up at the dealer's showroom, he will not conduct a background check to find out if you have a conviction for vehicular homicide, or if you've been ar-

If you keep your automobile on private property, there are virtually no restrictions. Even though your driver's license was revoked last week, you can drive your Jeep on your ranch as much as you want. Indeed, you can drink a case of beer before you go driving around your ranch, and enjoy the ride knowing that you are not violating a single law. (Of course, if any form of negligent or reckless conduct with your auto on your own property results in injury to an innocent person or to someone else's property, you will be financially responsible, and you may be prosecuted for violating laws against reckless endangerment.)

Thus, we can get rid of all the laws concerning gun storage in the home, together with the laws that ban possession of guns by various persons on private property. Current federal law outlaws gun possession, on private as well as public property, by anyone who has ever been convicted of a felony (even a nonviolent one), anyone with a misdemeanor involving domestic violence (such as two brothers who had a fistfight on their front lawn 30 years ago), anyone who has been dishonorably discharged from the military, any alcoholic, any illegal drug user (defined by

The guns-like-cars licensing system touted by Gore is already in effect in 30 states, where adults with a clean record can obtain a permit to carry a concealed handgun for lawful protection. (Vermont requires no permit.)

rested for drunk driving, or even if you have a driver's license. All you need is money.

The only "waiting period" to buy a car runs from the time you pay for it (with cash, a certified check, or a loan document) to the time the salesman hands you the keys. This waiting period tends to run from 30 seconds to five minutes. In contrast, firearms are the only product in this country for which FBI permission (via the national background check) is required for every single retail purchase.

regulation as anyone who has used drugs in the last year), any illegal alien, and various other "prohibited persons." Some states, such as Massachusetts, go even further, making all gun possession presumptively illegal, except for persons with special licenses. Once we really treat guns like cars, all of these laws will be swept away.

Most cities do prohibit property owners from storing their cars in an unsightly manner (say, on cinder blocks in the front yard), or from parking too many cars on the public street in front of their homes.