Race, Culture, and the “Digital Divide”

by Larry Schweikart

Prior to the September 11 attacks and the stock market slump, one of the hottest policy issues debated by technology scholars was the so-called racial “digital divide,” a term concocted to portray “haves and have nots” in the world of the Internet. The paper “Bridging the Digital Divide: The Impact of Race on Computer Access and Internet Use” is typical: “[S]ome social scientists are beginning to examine carefully the policy implications of current demographic patterns of Internet access and usage.”1 Former Vice President Al Gore suggested several policy proposals for closing the “digital divide,” and President Bill Clinton’s “Call to Action for American Education” proposed universal Internet access for students.

Studying race or group behavior is dubious at best; in today’s climate, it’s even dangerous, since racial groupings are used by collectivists to serve a political agenda. Nevertheless, it is useful to examine the claims being made. Thomas Sowell has cautioned that culture, for example, is a far more important factor in economic activity than race, and in the case of the digital divide, the “experts” may be examining racial characteristics when they should be considering cultural effects. There is also substantial new data showing that Americans are racially intermarrying more frequently. The Census Bureau threw up its hands in frustration trying to count mixed-race Americans in the last census.

That said, let’s examine the new arguments about the digital divide, pretending for a moment that race was a factor in computer access and use.

First, although many readers may have trouble recalling a time without computer technology, it is still relatively new. Nevertheless, the Internet has filtered through the social strata from the top down faster than any other technology in history. According to Joel Kotkin and Ross DeVol’s working paper for the Milken Institute, here is how fast selected products spread to 25 percent of the population:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Year Invented</th>
<th>Years to Spread to 25 percent of Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>1873</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automobile</td>
<td>1886</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>1906</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>1926</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cellular Phone</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>7</td>
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</tbody>
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Internet usage in 2001 reached 176 million Americans, 62 percent of the population, according to one Nielsen survey, up

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from 57 percent just a year earlier. Still, “digital dividers” sound the alarm. Jesse Jackson claimed that differences in Internet use between whites and blacks are “classic apartheid.” Research shows that differences in Internet use have little to do with income. Instead, computer access has played the pivotal role, according to Thomas Novak and Donna Hoffman of Vanderbilt University.

To solve the “problem” (with “problem” defined as any differences between groups), obviously all the government needs to do is to make sure that regardless of income, everyone has access to a computer.

Not so fast. Other evidence shows that blacks in high numbers have computer access at work—virtually equal to that of whites—and that if one holds income and education constant, blacks are more likely to have computer access at work than whites. This statistic makes sense considering that blacks, in far higher proportions than whites, work for state, local, or the federal government, where computers are provided.

Does education explain the “divide”? There appears to be a link between education and computer access, but a tenuous one. Both British and American studies have shown that more highly educated people tend to use the Internet more, although the notion that pinheaded “friendless nerds” comprise the majority of “surfers” is baseless: one U.K. study found that “internet users lead more sociable lives than non-surfers.” However, before researchers jump the gun to claim a link between education levels and Net use, existing studies would have to go much further to hold constant the quality of education in racial comparisons, something that is seldom done.

Divide Myth

When the rhetoric is stripped away, it appears that the racial “digital divide” is largely a myth, and to the extent it does exist, it is somewhat correlated to education and somewhat correlated to access to computers. Aha, say the “digital dividers,” maybe racial groups don’t have equal access to computers. Computer access can mean having a computer at work or at home, but researchers have tried to argue that having access only at work won’t cut it. Where a sharper divide occurs is in home computer ownership; 44 percent of whites have access to home computers compared to 29 percent of blacks. For this reason, at least one study claims, whites are more likely to use the Internet for information on a regular basis. Net-use rates correlate to having a home computer and a computer at work. The Vanderbilt study found that this was just about the only instance in which “race matters”—when students lacked a computer at home. “White, but not African American students,” wrote the researchers, “are able to take advantage of non-traditional access locations including homes of friends and relatives with home computers, and libraries and community centers with Internet access.” Even so, the study admitted more blacks were on line than is popularly thought and that the number was growing. As blacks became more familiar with the Internet, the authors concluded (apparently somewhat glumly), they would “catch up” to whites.

These findings pull the rug out from under the advocates of government provision of computers “access” through schools and public facilities. The key is not “access,” but attitude. Clearly, having access to public education did not close the “education gap.” Access to income-maintenance and welfare programs did not close the “income gap.” And now, with large numbers of computers at schools and public facilities, the researchers claim (surprise!) that free computers in public settings have not significantly closed the “digital gap.” Of course, to some extent, big-government types will use these studies for the perverse claim that we need to provide computers to low-income people in their homes. Indeed, in supporting tax-funded computer access for the homeless, the Digital Divide Network claimed that “Americans have long agreed that certain communications tools are so fundamental that their provision should not be left to the vagaries of the marketplace alone.”
Cultural Differences

The “digital divide” involves cultural differences and experience levels that no government policies can address. For instance, another Vanderbilt study “found interesting differences in media use between whites and African Americans that also deserve further probing. For example, although the rate of home PC ownership among African Americans is flat or even decreasing, their rates of cable and satellite dish penetration are increasing dramatically. At a minimum, our results suggest that African Americans may make better immediate prospects than whites for Internet access through cable modems and satellite technology.”

A British researcher found that there is a “huge divide” between those who surf the Net and those who do not. They differ in many respects, including income and education. Moreover, surfers “simply watch less television.” Once again, the “experts” are in a quandary, because as far as I know, races don’t demonstrate broadly different patterns of television viewing—some, to be sure, but even then, further analysis of the data points back to cultural, not racial, differences.

Are there differences in how races use the Internet? A broad study done in August 2000 by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, found significant differences in Net usage between blacks and whites. For example, blacks were 69 percent more likely than whites to have listened to music online, 45 percent more likely than online whites to play a game, and 12 percent more likely to “browse just for fun.” They were also nearly 40 percent more likely to have looked for information about jobs online and 65 percent more likely to seek religious information. But whites were slightly more likely to obtain financial information, and they purchased more products over the Internet. However, the races were approximately equal in their use of the Net to get political news or information.

Contrast white and black use of the Web with Asians, who obtain news from it at an even higher rate than whites, download music more often than blacks, and get political information more often than either blacks or whites. Asians are also more likely than blacks to search for jobs and conduct work-related research on the Net, or to buy or sell stocks online than whites. They are, however, less likely than blacks to search for health information or listen to music online.

The implications of these findings suggest trouble for those who think they can eliminate whatever “digital divide” that may exist through government programs. Buried in these studies is evidence that the members of racial or ethnic groups use the Internet differently—whites more for business and product purchases, blacks more for entertainment and spiritual growth, Asians for work research and political news.

One use of the Internet is not necessarily better than another—but there are clear differences that would manifest themselves in income, much the way a person who used his car to haul goods would have a different return on his vehicle from someone who polished it up for car shows on the weekend.

Market Bridges Divide

The fact is that the free market has moved rapidly to span the “digital divide” by making technology more accessible. Computers have become so inexpensive that almost anyone can own one, and Internet access is also
cheap. What critics of the “digital divide” do not grasp is that people make choices about their resources. Of course, people will accept a free computer . . . or a free television, or a free Thanksgiving turkey. But when pressed to spend their own money on goods or services, it becomes clearer what aspects of their lives people value most. Unless the big-government advocates are ready to start regulating the number of hours that people watch television, the state can hand out computers like free movie passes without any impact on incomes.

All that minority groups need to finish bridging the “digital divide” is to gain further hands-on experience, which will come as younger generations learn the tools of the computer age. There are also work habits that must be adopted if the Internet is to assist in wealth creation. But acquiring them in cyberspace is no different from learning them at McDonald’s. Once these habits are established, the benefits of Internet access can become fully realized.

One cannot, however, ignore the implications of using the Net more for entertainment than for work. It is almost a given that the next generation of computer-related products will be in the realm of the “telecosm,” George Gilder’s name for the ethereal world of data in the telecommunications networks. Gilder has argued that computers themselves will become less important and valuable as more information, and even operating systems, are stored on the Net and downloaded as needed. If that is true, what counts are skills, not hardware. And if Gilder is right, there will be more distractions than ever on the Net, requiring more discipline to block out entertainment and to bore in on wealth creation.

In short, racial aggregates may indeed have different use patterns when it comes to the Internet, but these are largely attributable to different cultural emphases. If this constitutes a “digital divide,” so be it. But do we really want government to dictate our Internet habits? Different people have different views on how best to use the Internet. When the call for “equal access” to the Net proves insufficient to change people’s perceptions about how they value their online time, will we next hear calls to “train” people to use the Internet in “preferred” ways? Let us hope that the freedom enabled by the telecosm prophesied by Gilder does not become another tool to divide the races. That would truly be a disastrous “digital divide.”

4. Ibid.
7. Ibid.