

Cyberpower and Pan-Africanism

A revolution is taking place that is transforming almost every aspect of society on a global level. Africa has been engulfed by this transformation, as has the entire African diaspora. Pan-Africanism, too—the discourse and action that links Africa and the African diaspora—is being transformed in the digital age. The purpose of this article is to present key discussion questions and a conceptual framework for cyberpower and its effects, based on a summation of the authors' experience.

After several decades of using home computers for our own reasons, we began to help others do the same. We taught low-income mothers how to use an Apple computer. We joined forces with a community-run computer lab in an African-American central city. We created loads of Web content about Black people. We studied public computing at community libraries. Most recently, we partnered with local government and others on community broadband. And we wrote about these projects and posted the results online. (See links on our own websites and most recently <http://eblackcu.org>.)

Among the important themes we identified were:

- 1) The value of cyberpower;
- 2) Overcoming the digital divide;
- 3) Three guiding principles for the digital age; and
- 4) Pan-Africanism.

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We expand on these themes below. The studies were conducted primarily among Black communities in the United States, part of the African diaspora, and in the following paper we highlight some of the lessons we learned. We urge CODESRIA's audience not to adopt them wholesale, but to critique and repurpose these ideas for the African continent.

Cyberpower

In the age of the Internet, if someone can't send an email or browse the Web they are much like people in the age of print who could not write but had to sign their name with an X. Yet many people and communities are still catching up to the Information Age and what digital tools offer. One word for what they offer is 'cyberpower'—power in cyberspace.

The usefulness of this word can be understood in comparison to another useful word, 'e-commerce'. E-commerce sums up what businesses, coders and consumers do in the online marketplace. The word itself helped to steer more people to buy and sell online, and e-commerce advanced as a result. Our experience with the word

cyberpower is much the same: the word came into use based on practice, then it mobilised more people to exercise their cyberpower. As with e-commerce, when you wield cyberpower, the results are visible as power in the real world, in a cycle from actual to virtual to actual.

Digital inequality tends to impact the same people that older inequalities such as poverty, oppression, discrimination and exclusion do. But the new digital tools are so powerful that not using them sets individuals, groups and communities even farther apart. The hardware and software are still changing. Only those who use them are able to help shape them and shape the future. And a global conversation is taking place every day online. They're talking about you—but can you answer back? If not, cyberpower is what you need.

Even as technology changes, diffuses and becomes cheaper, digital inequalities persist. For certain populations, access is impossible or is controlled, skills are more rare, support isn't there, or the tools and resources themselves just are not relevant to them. If the core conversations and the rich information sources are all online, yet not everyone is participating or even able to observe, how do we maintain democracy? Recent calls from the United Nations and elsewhere for a dialogue of civilisations, rather than a clash of civilisations, could be taking place online, but only if everyone can see, hear and speak in cyberspace.

It is not yet well understood, but communities in crisis—caused by poverty, disaster, war or some other adversity—are known to turn to technology for response and recovery. Cellphones, pop-up cybercafés, the Internet, all helped with recovery when America's Gulf Coast was hit with hurricanes Dennis, Katrina, Rita and Wilma in 2005. During England's deadliest foot-and-mouth-disease outbreak in 2001, farmers on quarantined farms quickly mastered home Internet use. The US armed forces now strategise in terms of land, sea, air and cyberspace. Immigrants all over the world have created digital diasporas. Whatever language people use to describe it, cyberpower is the driver in all these cases.

Hip hop can be seen as a technology-based African-American response to the crises of poverty, oppression and exclusion and a cyberpower project. In a community-based seminar, we proposed to create an album of original raps about IT. Students and community members were sceptical. One said, 'We don't know anything about computers.' But all the music-making was digital, put together in bedrooms and basements, and the result was a compilation of fifteen tracks advocating cyberpower. Sample these lyrics by one of the artists, S. Supreme:

Information technology
 Skipping the Black community
 with no apology
 Flipping the power off
 On an already alarming deficit,
 So please, please, PLEASE,
 PASS THE MESSAGE KID!
 Ohh Umm Diddy Dum Dum
 If he don't turn his Ice off
 And turn his head past the gas
 of Microsoft

He'll really be lost like the
 tribe, 'cause the time is now
 and that's a bet

How you throwing up a set and
 you ain't on the Net,

Yet you say you're a G?

I said I'm not Chuck D, but
 welcome to the terror

If you ain't ready to build in
 this information era

Survival of the fittest, our rights
 get diminished, cats be on their
 Crickets

But don't know about Linux.

Another example of cyberpower is our experience with a 2002 auction of Malcolm X's papers. The sale was discovered online, then thousands protested online and the sale was stopped. The incident began as we were monitoring eBay for items related to Malcolm X. We discovered that eBay's auction house, Butterfields, was about to sell thousands of pages of Malcolm's diaries and notes, recovered from a storage locker, for an expected price of USD 500,000. Using the listserv H-Afro-Am (moderated by Abdul Alkalimat), this news spread across multiple communities of scholars, librarians, activists and others. The American Library Association created a story about it on their online news site. *The New York Times* did a story. The *Guardian* newspaper ran an article about the impending sale and the online groundswell against it. The listservs and the news articles alerted the family as well as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library. They negotiated the cancellation of the sale. A final agreement with the seller transferred ownership to the family and housed the materials at the Schomburg. In our terms, actual life went into virtual space

to create actual change. The important historical papers (actual) were being auctioned (virtual); thousands of people were mobilised (virtual); traditional media carried the story (virtual and actual); and ultimately the materials were withdrawn from sale and placed intact in a public library archive for access by scholars and the public (actual).

Yet another demonstration of cyberpower comes from Wilmington, North Carolina. Faced with a teardown of their public housing project, in 1994 tenants made use of the relatively new public library computers and within a few months wrangled their own computer and Internet access (actual). By means of email and listservs (virtual) they recruited architects and planners to help them obtain, digest and answer developer and city plans. In this way, they won a seat at the negotiating table and, more importantly, were able to effect changes to the teardown plan, which included interim and long-term housing for residents.

All sorts of new tools for exercising cyberpower are available. Using them locates you in a lively community where you can share ideas, do battle and change the world. Cyberpower is involved in two related activities in the process of empowerment: 1) in the use of digital tools by individuals, groups and organisations for their own goals, and/or 2) the use of digital tools as part of community organising. The general idea is that people can use cyberpower in the virtual space to get power in the actual space. Cyberorganisers help get people cyberpower just as community organisers help get communities empowered.

Overcoming the Digital Divide

In the 1990s, the ‘digital divide’ became a concept and a rallying call to overcome the new inequalities that came with the digital age. Early surveys in the US defined the digital divide as the social gap between those who have access to and use computers and the Internet and those who do not. The digital divide has evolved with new technologies, but the haves are still ahead of the have-nots, and even the have-somes. This is because these technologies have been created not to serve the people, but to serve the powerful. Yet we have seen them serve the people.

A digital divide movement has arisen in each country that adopted digital ways of working and living. This movement discovered four parts to the divide: access, literacy, content and support. Access means having electricity, broadband or wifi, and computing devices of all kinds. Literacy means knowing how to use these tools or knowing how to learn them. Content means information that is relevant to you—is it in your own language? Can you make your own life better with it? And support means someone to provide help and advice. The only way to overcome the digital divide is to tackle all four parts.

For example, organisers from our university reached out to a local Black community. Their goal was to create a website of the history of this community. We held community meetings to celebrate and talk with local leaders. We met one-on-one with those who had saved documents and audiovisuals of the history. We recruited high-school students to scan documents and found ways to convert old tapes. We used the open source

Web publishing platform Omeka to organise and display the collection. The breakthroughs came when we found the community’s ‘Facebook archivist’ with 9,000 photos uploaded in one year, and when we linked the Omeka collection to Facebook so people could find it. Seven years later visitors continue to use the site.

Another example: A community-based computer lab needed more visitors. They organised one of us (Alkalimat) to speak on several occasions at the local public library. At every session, a packed house listened to Abdul explain what the Internet was about and why they needed to get online. Visitors then found their way to the local computer lab, where students and community members taught small classes to give people basic skills in digital literacy and helped them discover it was not hard. Success brought us more computers. Elementary school students and retirees were the biggest participants. A community garden became a summer project. We produced a booklet to explain what had been done and spread the word.

And: We connected with Chinese students who were looking into a project based on the Chinese diaspora. This project began when Chinese-American professionals decided to partner with teachers in rural China. They donated computers and the teachers taught community members as well as students. Individuals who had migrated to China’s cities sent a few computers back to their families, and the learning process engaged many people.

And: A million-dollar grant built three large public libraries in Namibia. The design was created in Washington, DC and librarians did

not receive any training. The final libraries held books and computers for public use. Even though the librarians expected people to check out books, the heaviest use of the libraries was community members at the Internet-enabled computers and printers, which were otherwise barely available in the country.

And: A US national broadband plan attracted attention from telecom reformers who wanted to bring fast Internet to their entire community. A year of fact-finding and grant-writing got underway. The ‘Below Ground’ project, was to bring fibre to the community. The ‘Above Ground’ project was to educate and support people who had not previously used high-speed Internet. However, with heavy lobbying from the telecom industry, money was directed mostly to the Below Ground aspect, with many conditions. Without efforts at building literacy, content and support, the Below Ground project—directed only at access—could not make nearly as much headway, and the community remains digitally divided.

And: After at least five years of many individuals and groups setting up experimental computer access spots in many US communities, the funding dried up and volunteers were flagging. But public library systems had embraced the task. Public access computers, printers and scanners became the norm in community libraries nationwide. People asked the library staff for help in using them. A new role had been invented for libraries, as cybernavigators, or tech helpers. Demand for this help is now so high that even during the pandemic some libraries are providing help by phone to people under stay-at-home orders. The library has become a public computing place.

Three values: cyberdemocracy, collective intelligence and information freedom

Our work has identified three fundamental values that are both desirable and possible in the digital age. They guide our understanding of social justice in this revolutionary technological transformation. They will ensure that our new society does not reproduce the social inequality of the past, but is inclusive, democratic and as revolutionary as the technology.

Cyberdemocracy

Everyone has to be included in the digital age. On one level this is like fighting for public education, the public library and even public health. Our cyber rights must be protected as civil rights. This is in opposition to the surveillance that is practised by tech companies.

Cyberdemocracy is also one of the great targets of any serious digital-age reparations programme. To repair what has been done to Black people means re-establishing them securely and fairly in the twenty-first century. That includes equity in digital access, content, literacy and support. Plus, cyberdemocracy is a call for public computing. The leading sites for public computing so far have been public libraries and schools at all levels. But cyberdemocracy means Internet access for all.

Collective intelligence

Large datasets are the rule today for corporations and rich governments. Open access journals that offer free online content are surging in number. To go further, the primary

documents of Black history, such as every slave narrative, must be digitised and formatted as a searchable dataset. A digital archive can include the research done on the texts. Our knowledge is about to leap exponentially.

A major aspect of collective intelligence is consensus. Consensus is the ultimate summation of consciousness. On the basis of cyberdemocracy we can build connectivity to achieve consensus. This will require shifting our focus from hierarchy to egalitarian interdependence.

Collective intelligence overpowers the segmentation of knowledge. Different disciplines contribute to our databases without prejudice. The community contributes as well as the campus, on the basis of lifelong learning. The map of knowledge structures and clusters, now organised in distinct academic disciplines, is about to be reconceptualised and reorganised.

Information freedom

The new information technologies produce and distribute information in such a way that drives its exchange value down towards zero. For example, new software is soon discounted and then distributed with hardware in a bundle at minimal cost. This new thinking has impacted scholarly discourse and the exchange of information so that global networks are emerging based on information freedom. Early examples are the organizations H-Net in the US and JiscMail in the UK. These organisations established servers to enable scholars and others to create free discussion lists on topics in the Humanities, Social Sciences and, in the case of JiscMail, the hard

sciences as well. These services continue today. Another is the US National Institutes of Health, which has decided that it is in the general public interest that government-sponsored, health-related research is made available for free.

The privatisation of global culture is a dangerous trend. Cultural and scientific information about and from all of humanity has to be preserved and shared for all, and for our descendants. It doesn't make sense in the age of the Internet and the World Wide Web that we still have to pay to read the major leaders in our intellectual tradition, be they W. E. B. DuBois, Martin Luther King or Malcolm X.

Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism has one foot in the reality of each African country and the other in the African diaspora and its connections with African descendants everywhere. The most powerful manifestation of Pan-Africanism is how collaboration and joint action takes place between countries in the African continent, involving governments, institutions, movements and people in general. Cyberpower involves all of this.

Unity within the African continent is a refutation of the colonial system if based on the autonomous self-determination of African people themselves. Extending this unity to pro-Africa forces in the African diaspora reverses the evil destruction of the slave trade and can lead to an era of rebuilding. Pan-Africanism in the twenty-first century must mean cyberpower for the African masses guided by the principles of cyberdemocracy, collective intelligence, and information freedom.