Technology Divide Among Minorities Essay, Research Paper

Technology Divide Among Minorities

New advances in technology like the Internet were supposed to lead the path of a new era of fairness for everybody in this country. As the great equalizer or leveler, the Web would give every American access to more education, business, public services, and economic power than ever before. But at the same time, there is evidence that advances in technology may be also aggravating existing patterns of inequalities among minorities in this country. These minorities like Blacks and Hispanics, which are entering the information age way behind many white communities in America, could suffer the most.

The racial division in access to technology is real and cannot simply be attributed to income or race. This is a symptom of much deeper social, economic, and educational gaps that emerged long before the Internet. With historically inferior technology access in under-served neighborhood schools and at home. Minorities have been discouraged from pursuing careers in computer education, training and professions in technology. Currently African-Americans and Hispanics often don t have the backgrounds and experience considered by many to be necessary for the Internet era. Just 7.2 percent of engineering and computer science degrees went to Blacks and 5.9 percent to Hispanics in 1998, according to the National Science Foundation. And only 23 percent of African-American and 26

2

percent of Hispanics households are online, compared with 39 percent for white Americans. African-American and Latinos compose 22 percent of the Silicon Valley area population, but only 4 percent of employees are African-American, and just 8 percent are Latinos, and many of them work in service and support positions only, according to Forrester Research Inc. These gaps in access to technology reflect the fact that without more manager and executives from minorities working in tech-companies, which can help to bring technology access to the less fortunate people; the Web could end up reinforcing the divisions within our society instead of erasing them.

These strong facts reflecting the result of a perennial denial to technology education, employment training as well as access to new technologies for minorities

is a slap in the face of government organizations that say that the racial digital division is an exaggerated fear from civil right advocates. Even as the Internet becomes more accessible, a skills gap will persist unless public schools are able to offer equally technology oriented teaching and equipment resources connected to the Internet. Smaller class size and higher teacher pay might well do more to improve heavily minority district schools than a connection to the superhighway.

I consider myself very fortunate because I entered the technology revolution in this country way back to the early days of the personal computer beginnings.

3

Eventhough I am Latin and came to this country when I was in my early twenties. I had the opportunity to have access to new computer technologies by way of my employer in 1989, and from that point on my desire and interest to learn and a pursue a career in technology increased my opportunities of a better future in this country. I started working as a warehouse employee in a computer parts wholesaler and manufacturer of personal computers in Miami, Florida. Before working for this company, I spent two years working in different low skill positions like supermarket clerk, warehouse clerk for an apparel company. At that time I could had not imagine in my wildest dream that personal computer technology would play a decisive role in the development of business, economical, social and political life of this country. Personal computer started to play a big role in my life by accident and necessity at the same time because at that moment the only interest I had in my life was to make a living. Therefore, I could provide food and a roof for my family.

I had no interest in become a computer professional just to make a living out it. Eventhough I had taken some computer programming classes in 1984 in my native country Nicaragua, this classes did not wake up my interest for following a career in technology because I was not actually interacting with a computer but writing programming code in a piece of paper instead. Programming a computer did not look to interesting for me at that time. For one thing, personal computers in those days when I took those classes were a very rare and expensive animal. Not to

4

many people were able to have access to computers because they were very expensive. Only large companies who could afford to pay hefty prices for a piece of equipment that could only do mostly limited functions were able to have access to such type of technology. After my first experience with computers in this country, I started to have more interest in making a career in computers by working with them. Learning how to operate, assembly, and troubleshoot a personal computer was not an easy task for me because I had to learn a whole new set of technical vocabulary, which I was not familiar with it before. Another obstacle was the language barrier, due to the fact that I did not speak or read English very well and all of the documentation and references related to learning and work on a personal computer were written in English. After working for a year in this company and having struggled most of the time in my goal for becoming a computer technician. I decided to approach my objective in a different way. I enrolled in Miami Dade Community College 1991 and concentrated my free time in learning English the best possible way I could. I had to work two jobs and save money in order to enroll and

pay for my classes because my earnings were low and barely allowed me to survive in this country. My work provided me with hands on environment where I could sharpen my knowledge acquired in class but at the same time did not encouraged too much about staying with the company because of the low salary. After a couple of year I realized that I was not going anywhere If I stayed working for this company, so I decided to look for a better opportunity elsewhere. I got a new job

5

in another computer wholesaler who offered me more money but nothing new in the essence of the job because I was doing the same thing, assembling computers.

In 1993 the Internet was in its early stages and like almost any new technology, this one was expensive and difficult to acquire because not to many ISP (Internet Service Provider) offered, so I did not put to much attention to it. I continue working hard and studying at Miami Dade Community College, but at the same time I felt the necessity of getting my own computer. I needed it for my class homework, practice and learn how to be prolific with software installation and support in my free time at home. The situation was very ironic because I was a computer technician who knew how to assembly and repair computers but I could not afford to buy a new computer for myself because they were very expensive. My desire to get a new personal computer was interfering with my responsibilities toward providing my family with food and bills payments at home. I had to decide whether to continue in my pursuing of my goal or continue my support for my family, which was my priority at that moment.

This situation affected me very much because personal computers were now part of my life and if I wanted to master my knowledge on them, I had to get rid of my saving in order to buy one. My personal experience show how low income workers in minorities have to deal with the fact that access to new technology is not

6

providing any benefits in the short run for them. Fortunately, a friend of mine had a used computer for sale and I bought at a reasonable price from him after all because I knew already the importance of a personal computer in my life.

Another example an African-American friend of mine named Celeste. She is a 34 years old single mom and a graduate student from Miami Senior High. She did not go to college and she the typical example of people who are falling behind the Internet revolution and changes in technology. When she attended high school, there was no much access to computers in schools. So, she never became aware of the importance of knowing how to work and operate a computer. After working for 10 years at a local company, where she was making $8 dollars an hour until she was let go by the company because of her lack of computer knowledge. Then she realize how important is to learn new skills in order to be a good candidate for another work position in another company. She tried to look for some technical training in a local private computer school. But, when she knew about the astronomical prices she had to pay for the classes, she got discouraged. She tried to buy a computer and found out that she could not afforded it. She is trying to catch up with the technology advances by learning computer skills at a local community youth center. She is learning word processing, spreadsheet, and database plus windows operating system. She is also learning how to use the Internet and take advantages of it. Now she understands the necessity of computer and has become more aware of her

7

future because of this experience. She doesn t want her son to face the same obstacles she is having now with her lack of knowledge in computers.

I did not start using the Internet until about three years ago. I had not real desire in getting a connection to the Internet because the contents of it were not really interesting for me and the ISP only offered limited access time at that moment. Actually, the common citizen did not put to much attention to the Internet revolution probably because the idea of a huge computer interconnection was not an appealing idea for changing the traditional way of doing businesses as it has been for so many years. Many people though of the Internet as being an insecure way of doing business. People fear that by doing business trough the Internet their private life were being jeopardy because there were so many glitches and misinformation on how Internet companies were going to handle security and private information of customers. But the Internet in fact has become a far more important element in everybody s life now because it is supposed to be a force for equal opportunity. Although this idea might look very tenting, my fears are that the Internet revolution could create an even more divided society, which could bring enormous consequences and create divisions that seem to make all the different gaps and disadvantages for minorities in access to new technologies to grow even wider.

Work Cited

Henderson, Wade. Turning The Digital Divide Into Digital Opportunity. www.civilrights.org

Leadership Conference On Civil Rights November 20, 1999.

Levy, Kelly Racial Divide Continues to Grow. www.ntia.doc.gov February 6, 2000

Levy, Kelly Hispanics Falling Back in Information Age. www.ntia.doc.gov February 6, 2000

Logan, Hill. Racial Digital Divide. The Nation April 26, 1999: 10

Society A Small Town Reveals America s Digital Divide. Business Week October 4, 1999: 188+

Yang, Catherine C. The Great Equalizer? Not By a Long Shot.

Business Week September 27, 199: EB54