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Digital Discrimination: The New Racism?

Euphoric promises of a cyberspace utopia and digital democracy notwithstanding, the Net is saturated with racial ideologies, says Rayvon Fouché.

by **Christina Jeng** | 02.27.2004 ReadMe 4.3 | [Print it.](#)

"Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live. We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power..." Blah, blah, blabbity, blah, blah.

So wrote John Perry Barlow, dubbed cyberspace's Thomas Jefferson by *Yahoo Internet Life Magazine*, in his "**A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace**," a 1996 manifesto circulated through e-mail and posted on thousands of sites. And while assistant science and technology professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Rayvon Fouché appreciates Barlow's "neo-utopian" view, he contends, "it's impossible to create any world devoid of the powerful social and culture factors of race, gender, and class."

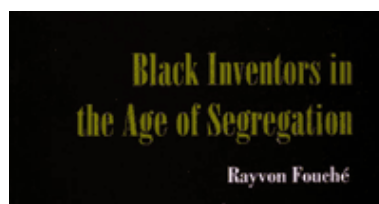


Rayvon Fouché. Photo: Rayvon Fouché © Rayvon Fouché 2003

To Fouché, the Net is a technology saturated with racial ideologies. In his recently published book, ***Black Inventors in the Age of Segregation: Granville T. Woods, Lewis H. Latimer, and Shelby J. Davidson***, he examines the relationship between race and technology. He divides technology into three parts: the physical material it's made of, the way it's used, and the knowledge or ideas that drive its design and production. In *Black Inventors*, he looks at how three prominent 20th century black inventors struggled to contribute to the history of technological innovation during a period of escalating racial tensions. In Fouché's opinion, the same factors that influenced who could invent during the early 1900's—race, class, and

gender—still affect the field of engineering and other spheres of technological innovation today.

The Internet, says Fouché, is not as race- or class-free as cyber-utopians such as Barlow once thought it was. Sure, says Fouché, he can log onto the Net as a 50-year-old South Asian woman and no one would be the wiser. Or he could sign on as the African-American he really is, or morph into a single Latina mother, or how about a teenage valley girl with a crush on Josh HotNet? True, he has the freedom "to express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity..." (Barlow). The notion that digital media such as the weblog provide a publishing platform for the masses has inspired flights of Net pundit idealism.



Recent comments by Bill Gates have stirred up a small backlash among copyright reformists

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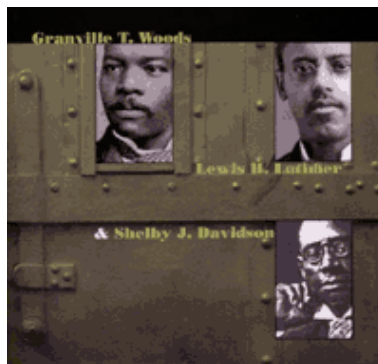
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Nonetheless, as Fouché points out, "You have to have access to a computer" to join Barlow's online utopia, and race and class have proven to be barriers to getting wired. According to a 1999 **U.S. Department of Commerce** study, "Black households [...] continue to trail white households in their access to computers and the Internet." And in a 2003 **Pew Internet and American Life report**, researchers say "being white is a strong predictor of whether a person is online, controlling for all the other demographic variables" such as having a college degree, being a student, being employed, and having a comfortable household income. This is where Barlow's manifesto and the promises of overly optimistic Net promoters like him start to break down.



Black Inventors in the Age of Segregation: Granville T. Woods, Lewis H. Latimer, and Shelby J. Davidson: RPI Professor Fouché's book looks into the lives of struggling 20th century black inventors.

That said, a 1999 **Cyber Dialogue survey** found that 4.9 million African-American adults were online, more than any other U.S. minority group. However, while that figure represents 28% of the black population in America, it's still a smaller piece of the demographic pie than the 37% of adult whites who were online in '99.

Furthermore, the growth of the African-American population online has largely resulted, not in the creation of a color-blind utopia, but in the targeting of blacks as consumers.

Take America Online: According to **Target Market News**, AOL commissioned a national survey through Digital Marketing Services, Inc. (DMS) and found African-Americans to be "active online consumers, who respond more to online offerings and purchase more clothing and music online than the general online population." Tapping into this consumer base, AOL recently purchased **BlackVoices.com**, one of the largest online African-American communities. **Target Market News** reports that AOL plans to aggressively develop an African-American strategy that will involve its **Africana.com** site as well.

Buyer Beware

Targeting African-Americans for consumer purposes isn't just a Net thing. According to Fouché, it permeates technological culture. It's a common misconception, he claims, that black people are best suited to consuming, and that they only *use* technologies, rather than *creating* them.

Worse yet, argues Fouché, since our technology is created by and for white males, blacks and other ethnic minorities are left to passively consume the products of this mindset, such as violent, hypermasculine videogames that offer players fantasies of domination and power—games like **Half-Life**, **Medal of Honor**, and **Return to Castle Wolfenstein**.

"It's very infrequent that...corporations come into the black community saying 'So, what are your needs?'" says Fouché. "There [must] be more black engineers and designers that will say, 'Well, what about my people?'"

The answer, for Fouché, is to get more African-Americans into technical institutes such as RPI, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and California Institute of Technology, schools he hopes will produce the next, racially diverse generation of scientists and engineers.

"For the last decade, the black student population [at RPI] has been about 4 percent, never getting higher or any lower," Fouché laments.

But why push African-Americans into fields and institutions he believes are built on a

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"Music Makes the People Come Together", So Leave Raves Alone: 7 comments

but why push African-Americans into fields and institutions he believes are built on a Western mindset fraught with racist assumptions?

"It's impossible to extract oneself from the influences of Western culture," says Fouché, "but to be in a position to make counter-hegemonic responses to your oppressive condition, you have to first deeply understand the system that oppresses you." Then and only then, he asserts, can you "make technological decisions based on a set of priorities (racial, ethnic, cultural or otherwise)."

Racism? What Racism?

For the most part, says Fouché, "the black community doesn't see technology as an ideological force affecting their lives." They easily recognize racial representations like the **minstrel show**, he notes, but as we move into the digital realm, racial ideologies and even the loss of black culture are not so easily recognizable.

In an ongoing **project** that examines the shift from **analog** to **digital** technology, Fouché looks at the hip-hop art of "scratching," a black cultural practice popular in New York City during the late 70's and early 80's. Turntables were originally an analog technology, "but once you go from analog turntables and vinyl [records] to digital turntables and cd-roms, the cultural practice is condensed into **algorithms**," he says. Scratching on a digital turntable is based not on the artist's gestures, notes Fouché, but on a software programmer's representation of what scratching sounds like.

"That's where it gets very scary," he says. "This cultural practice that has a long tradition is reduced to lines of code, and by reducing it to lines of code, you lose the people and you lose the black culture."

Fortunately, technology is redeemable. Recently, Fouché also co-edited, with cultural critic and Associate Professor of Science and Technology Studies at RPI Ron Eglash, **Appropriating Technology: Vernacular Science and Social Power**, an anthology of essays that examine the ways in which "outsiders," such as Latinos, blacks, homosexuals, and women, reinvent consumer products, from low-rider cars to turntables to cell phones, and thereby "defy the notion that they are merely passive recipients of technological products."



Appropriating Technology: Vernacular Science and Social

Power: editors Ron Eglash, Jennifer L. Croissant, Giovanna Di Chiro and Rayvon Fouché examine how "outsiders" reinvent technology.

In his **introduction**, Eglash describes how Native American artist Sharol Graves, for example, reinvented CAD/CAM software, originally intended for

computer circuit design, and used it for her **Indian design** drawings. Eglash quotes Graves as saying, "I wanted the public to know that a Native American was working in the research and development of high technology, just to blow a few stereotypes about the

'Indian Mind.'" Appropriating technology, as Graves does, yields strategies for strengthening cultural identity, argues Eglash.

Says Fouché, "The revolution never comes, just a migration of power."

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Christina Jeng is a freelance journalist, "Tech News" editor of **ReadMe**, and contributing writer for **The Washington Square News**.

very interesting

by Michael L. on Wednesday, 03/03/2004 - 22:25

That is an excellent point. I always felt that way myself in terms of the limitations of accessibility to the internet. It IS in fact where the future is headed but at the same time, not everyone has an equal opportunity to take part in it. Perhaps an increase in the social gap is inevitable because of this? I guess we'll see. I'm glad someone explored this.

Excellent article!

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very well written and thought

by K. Lo on Thursday, 03/04/2004 - 01:32

very well written and thought-provoking article.

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Well written!

by Cheryl C. on Thursday, 03/04/2004 - 12:23

A very well-researched and informative article. Often we take the availability of new technologies for granted while remaining ignorant of the racial and social repercussions that come with it, as well as the social imbalances that might have made it available in the first place. This article is definitely a good eye-opener to the considerations we must make in a technology-driven society, where race and social classes are always affected in different ways. As Fouche says, knowledge of sources of oppression is the first step to responding accordingly and effectively, and this article serves well as a platform of awareness from which we can better move forward.

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article

by connie on Thursday, 03/04/2004 - 15:48

go nina :) well-written and thoroughly researched. i commend you.

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John Perry Barlow's Rebuttal

by **Christina Jeng** on Friday, 03/12/2004 - 12:27

The following e-mail was sent to me by John Perry Barlow, whose "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" is cited in the article above:

In an interview, Fouché disagrees with the popular rhetoric that says the Internet is colorblind. Basically, he doesn't quite buy into the cyberspace manifestos similar to your own.

I'm not sure that I do either, at this point.

Fouché says, "It's clear that the Internet is not race, gender, and class free, the mere fact to be able to get online has a class element to it, you have to have access to a computer."

I can't disagree with any of that, though it's a little obvious. And, with any luck, it is not a permanent condition. What I've seen in Africa convinces me that the Internet will at least even things up a bit eventually.

Fouché says science has "been constructed as a truth to privileged whiteness, privileged maleness, primitive to privileged westernness, and that's how our science is constructed and all of our technology is built on this scientific technological foundation."

This is inevitably true. All work reflects its maker, and science, as we think of it, has largely been created by privileged, white, western men. It's worth noting that science makes an effort to see without filters, but, of course, as Anais Nin said, "We do not see things as they are, we see things as we are."

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