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Cover Page Footnote

This essay is based on the actual study entitled, Computer Technology Utilization Survey by The Trotter Institute/University of Massachusetts Boston and Freedom House, Inc. Copyright 1995.

Computer Utilization and Attitudinal Patterns in a Black Community

by James Jennings

During the Spring and Summer of 1995 The William Monroe Trotter Institute conducted a survey of resident utilization patterns and attitudes towards various facets of computer technology. This survey was commissioned by Freedom House, Inc. and supported with a grant from the AT&T Foundation in Boston, Massachusetts. The goal of this survey, composed of adult residents who have been served by Freedom House, and agency representatives of a small number of selected community-based organizations, is to inform planners at this agency about the computer technical needs, interests, and utilization patterns of its clients.

The survey conducted by The Trotter Institute provides information about the level of knowledge and utilization by residents and clients of Freedom House. This survey is a limited, and exploratory study. Nevertheless, the findings may prove useful about germane and critical questions and issues. This survey can be utilized for planning purposes on the part of Freedom House, but also in raising broader questions about strategies for expanding access to computer technology and information superhighway resources in inner cities. This kind of data can be useful in planning and developing future computer education and training programs for the benefit of community residents. Freedom House can utilize the findings of this report to assess the appropriateness of current computer courses, and other computer technology services; determining the feasibility, or range, of fees for computer courses and computer-related technical assistance; planning logistical arrangements, i.e., best days and hours for offering computer courses and related services; and, determining the kinds of computer hardware that residents should be exposed to for purposes of enhancing the their technological capacities. Freedom House can also utilize the results of this survey to approach funding sources, including government, foundations, and the corporate sector, for assistance in expanding the level of computer and information superhighway literacy, as well as access to these kinds of resources. Additional information about the implications of the findings for planning on the part of Freedom House, as well as future research, is provided in the Conclusion.

Specifically, the survey provides some limited information about the awareness, and current uses of computer technology, as well as attitudes of the target population towards aspects of computer and information technology. Freedom House intends to use this survey, as well as other sources of information, to continue, and to plan expansions of effective education and training programs aimed at enhancing the access of community residents and clients to computer technology and the information superhighway.

The survey produced the following findings:

- While a majority of the respondents (58%) indicated that they own a computer, most did not know what kind, or brand of computer they actually possessed.
- Most respondents indicate that they do not utilize a fax/modem, or CD-ROM drive on the computers they own.
- Very few respondents (6.4%) indicate that they use their computers frequently, or on a daily basis. Only 5.3 percent of respondents indicate that they use their computers at least 4 to 6 times per week.
- Three quarters of the respondents with children indicate that their children use computers at school. One fifth of the respondents with children had no knowledge of their children's use of computers at school.
- The major purpose for utilizing computers among this sample is word processing activities.
- While an overwhelming number of respondents do have a telephone in their homes, and many also have telephone answering machines, most do not have fax machines, voicemail, cellular phones, or pagers. About half the respondents reported having cable television programming.
- A majority of the respondents (> 53.0 percent) are not familiar with terms like, "Information Superhighway," "Pentium Chips," "Desktop Publishing." A significant proportion of the respondents were not familiar with increasingly commonly-used terms like, "hardware," (28.0 percent), or "Email," (33.0 percent), or "software," (33.0 percent).
- Respondents, except for six individuals, indicated that they wanted to learn more about computers, and also wanted their children to learn more about computers. Thirty-three persons in the sample of 93, listed Freedom House and Roxbury Community College as places they would approach for computer technology information. Approximately an equal number (32), however, offered that they would not know where to go to gain this kind of information. Many respondents, almost half of the total sample (54) indicated that they would be willing to spend 3 to 6 hours per week in attending classes for this purpose.
- A significant number of respondents (73) indicated that Monday and Tuesday would be the best days of the week to take classes, and preferably in the evenings. Afternoon sessions were selected by only 14

respondents, and later days in the week tend not to be preferred by many respondents.

- While thirty-four percent of all respondents would be willing to pay for 4-week computer classes if under $100, an overwhelming majority, or fifty-nine percent, could not afford to pay any amount.
- Most respondents learned something about computers as a result of their children's exposure to computers in schools. While 29 percent learned about computers in this manner, another 38 percent learned something about computers as a result of their job responsibilities, or job settings. A smaller percentage (16.1 percent) were motivated to learn about computers as a result of interest in pursuing entrepreneurial activities.
- Although very few respondents reported being discouraged about learning or using computers, most who did respond this way, indicated that cost of equipment was the major factor.
- Information based on responses from a small number of community-based organizations suggests that this sector is not yet positioned to assist fully in the expansion of access to computer technology and information superhighway resources on the part of their clients.

This report also examines these findings within the context of national developments related to general issues of race, and access to opportunities for learning and utilizing computer technology, including access to the so-called, information superhighway. The Conclusion also suggests briefly the kinds of research activities that should be pursued in light of the findings of this report, as well as potential areas of attention on the part of Freedom House.

Conclusion

The findings of this survey suggest that there may exist some misinformation, and inaccurate perceptions about issues related to access to computer technology and superinformation resources on the part of residents of predominantly Black urban communities. One study reported, for example, that there is a "great deal of technophobia and prejudice with regard to high-technology" on the part of African-Americans, and that "in the minds of many African-Americans having, using and working with computers is considered a 'white thing to do.'" (MiNet, Inc.). This claim is not substantiated by our survey of residents in Boston's inner city neighborhoods. In fact, we discovered the opposite. There is a great demand on the part of Blacks for more information and access to computer technology and information superhighway resources. An overwhelming proportion of the residents interviewed, as well as the representatives of community-based organizations, desire to know more about these issues, and want to become skilled in utilizing elated services. Furthermore, a significant number of respondents are willing to pay for this kind of training and access.

The problem of access does not seem to lie with the attitudes of poor and working-class residents in inner cities, but rather with the prohibitive costs of such services, and lack of information about the uses of computer technology and, resources on the information superhighway. According to a paper by David R. Hughes, Sr. and George L. Johnston, "The Other Half: The Training Cost of a National Telecommunications Infrastructure," and presented to a workshop sponsored by the Science, Technology, and Public Policy Program at Harvard University (May 26-27, 1993), there are basically three kinds of considerations that should be reflected in strategies for training people in computer and information superhighway literacy: technological, economic, and human costs. The latter includes such factors as personal interest and time available for new training and education. Our survey suggests that the components of availability and access to technology, as well as the economic costs of such, are greater obstacles than the human costs incurred in advancing the technological capacities of inner city residents.

Perhaps another misperception is that the general population in this country is far more advanced than residents in inner cities regarding a comprehensive understanding of various facets of computer technology and information superhighway resources. There is certainly a significant gap in access to this information and resources; but this does not necessarily mean that people living outside inner cities know much more about the nature of this technology, beyond basic terms. For instance, a Harris Poll conducted during July 1994 reported that 34% of all adults have computers at home, and 39% use one at work. But it added: "While most people are familiar with the words 'hardware' and 'software,' most people are not familiar with terms such as 'on-line services,' 'E-mail,' 'interactive services,' 'digital information' or the Internet." While 60% of all adults have heard the term 'hardware,' according to this poll, "only 48% have a 'reasonable' understanding of what the term means."[1]

An issue that became apparent in the course of this research, is the gap that seems to be increasing between certain population groups regarding familiarity and utilization of computer technology and superinformation resources. Despite strong interest in wanting to become computer literate, it seems too few residents in inner cities have opportunities to learn more about these issues. The gap between Blacks, Whites, and Latinos regarding access and use of computers, as a matter of fact, continues to widen. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, only 4.4% of all Blacks 18 years of age and over had access to a computer in 1984; for Latinos, this figure was 4.1%, and for whites, it was 9.6%. By 1993, these disparities increased; in this year, 13.8% of all Blacks who are 18 years and over enjoyed access to a computer, compared to 12.9% of all Latinos, and 26.9% of all whites in the same age category.[2]

Another important point we wish to make is that survey findings reported here should raise a number of concerns about a broad range of social and economic issues among educators, and representatives of business, and government. According to a national report issued by

The Children's Partnership, "America's Children and the Information Superhighway," (1994) emerging information technologies will change the nature of United States society, and influence the quality of life for all its citizens. A growing number of jobs require skills linked to computer utilization and information superhighway resources. Increasingly, businesses will require workforces that are computer literate. This report estimated that currently the lack of information literacy among large numbers of people costs business between 25 and 30 billion dollars annually. The need of society for a well-informed, and computer literate citizenry is not being addressed, according to this report. And, very importantly, the report added that the commercial marketplace cannot be relied on to rectify some of the problems in this area. Thus, unless government, business, public schools, and communities collaborate to develop appropriate responses and strategies, it seems unlikely that inner cities will be able to marshal resources for computer-related education and preparation of children and adults in these places. While community-based organizations can be a place where this kind of preparation is implemented, it seems that this sector must first prepare itself for this role. Generally, the responses of the agencies indicate that assistance is required in preparing and positioning their organizations for this task.

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The above findings and analysis suggests that Freedom House should explore several possibilities as it continues to plan and implement specific activities related to computer and information technology. This organization should certainly not shy away from a more aggressive and expanded role in this area. Freedom House is currently spearheading a vital effort that should be expanded in order to increase opportunities of access for the inner city of Boston. Since the issue of access to computer and information technology is becoming increasingly important in our society, and for many different reasons, there may be numerous organizations in the corporate and foundation sectors that could partner with Freedom House to expand its role in this area.

The computer training classes offered at this organization should be expanded, in our opinion. The courses should also include advanced modules that go beyond simply the introduction to word processing, spreadsheets, and basic information technology. It seems to us that Freedom House should also consider becoming a major training center, targeted specifically for agency personnel, as well as religious institutions in the community. Training should focus on the immediate uses and applications of computer and information technology, but very importantly, also on conceptual and policy challenges facing these agencies as far as computer and information technology is concerned. By examining and developing responses to pedagogical, political, and policy issues related to computer and information technology, such a training center could raise important issues and possibilities, such as utilizing computer and information technology to improve, and to re-conceptualize, the nature and delivery of a broad range of services offered by community-based organizations. This kind of effort could expand the understanding of this technology in ways that lead to greater programmatic and service collaboration between community-based agencies. Such a training center could also include agency introduction to the plethora of data bases germane to service delivery, and available via the Internet. It can also include assisting community agencies to develop web-sites, and communicate with each other, and other sectors, with greater efficiency and effectiveness.

This study suggests that neighborhood organizations should work aggressively with public schools in the area of computer and information technology. Note that one of the most interesting findings is that many adults in the target community learn about computers and information technology through the exposure of their children to such, in public schools. The findings reported here show that the linkage between public schools, community based organizations, and the general public is a vital one in expanding access and broad understanding of computer and information technology.

The above are suggestions for further planning are based on a limited study. There is great need to expand research and evaluations regarding access to computer technology and the information superhighway. The survey conducted by the Trotter Institute, as well as targeted focus group activities, should be replicated on a wider scale. Despite the call for more research and evaluations, however, we can conclude by reiterating that the findings of this exploratory report point to a critical need for expanding access to computer and information technology in the inner cities. Responding to this need, however, must include the development, and utilization, of appropriate strategies, tools, and organizations, to implement plans for expanding access.

Notes
[1] Louis Harris & Associates, Inc., "The Harris Poll 1994," #55, September 5, 1994.
[2] EPM Communications, "Minority Markets Alert," Vol. VII, No. 7, July 1995.