

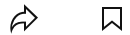
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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

# A NET GAIN IN POWER

TWO ENTREPRENEURS GUIDE BLACKS ONTO THE COMPUTER AND INTO THE FUTURE

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By Don Oldenburg

When Stafford Battle was 13, he stood at the front door of his town house near the corner of 11th and H streets NE, his eyes smarting from the tear gas and smoke. Flames silhouetted the skyline. His father warned him to stay inside. Out the back door, his mother said something about the grocery store, that it had been looted.

"It used to be when you'd say black power,' people had the image of a raised clenched fist and a molotov cocktail," says Battle, whose childhood neighborhood was scorched when the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. ignited the 1968 riots.

Now, working in the glow of a Macintosh Quadra 605 in an equipment-cramped office in his Upper Marlboro town house, Battle says that black power is not about molotovs but about megabytes and modems. This time, what will be set on fire is minds.

"The revolution will not be televised, it will be digitized," says Battle, adding on to Gil Scott-Heron's insurgent lyrics of 25 years ago. "We're not trying to destroy the system; we're saying, finally the system is there for us."

The system of which he speaks is the Internet -- the exponentially growing global web of computer networks. Until 1991, it had been primarily the domain of government agencies and universities. Now, made widely available by commercial services such as CompuServe, America Online and Prodigy, the Internet provides some 30 million users worldwide immediate and inexpensive access to unlimited communication and unfathomable troves of research, information and marketing services.

But there's a glitch. "The majority of African Americans from all walks of life simply have no idea what the Internet or computer on-line services are about," says Battle. In the '60s, "Malcolm X said if you want to keep something from the Negro, hide it between the pages of a book. The spin now is if you want to keep usable, pertinent information away from black people, hide it on the computer."

Only 18 percent of African Americans have personal computers at home compared with 32 percent of whites, according to a survey conducted in April by the Times Mirror Center for People and the Press, a Washington-based public interest and policy research group. That marked the continuation of a trend reported by the 1989 U.S. Census that showed 8.4 percent of the adult black population had computers at home, compared with 18.3 percent of whites; and 18.4 percent of the black population used computers at any location, compared with 29.4 percent of the white.

The lack of minority involvement in computers has become a national issue. "Knowledge is power," says Wade Henderson, director of the NAACP's Washington bureau, whose national organization has been studying telecommunications policy and how it affects the black community for two years. *A Guide to the Power*

Last month, Battle and Rey Harris published the first how-to manual aimed for blacks about the computer and the on-line technology that they believe will determine prosperity and survival for minorities in the next century. A 90-page book designed with revolutionary desktop computer technology, "The African American Resource Guide to the Internet" mixes a rap on "New Black Power" with the ABCs of using the Internet. It details what's already on-line of interest to the black community -- chat boards and information centers such as America Online's Ebony Room and eWorld's African American Information Network. The guide's underlying message: Say it loud, but say it on-line.

"There's a lot of books out there about the Internet -- 130 at last count," says Harris, 45, a marketing consultant who lives in the District and collaborates on-line with Battle from his home IBM 386 when he doesn't make the drive just beyond USAir Arena to their Prince George's County office. "But not a single one of those books is dedicated to African American interest. . . . With all the Internet publications, you never see a black face" in their pages.

The two entrepreneurs started brainstorming their Internet guide in April. Their paths had crossed at African Heritage Literature Society meetings, and later at the Black Expo here, where Harris was promoting another book, "The Success Guide: The Guide to Black Resources."

A year earlier, Battle quit his job as an editor at the Journal of Housing to publish a newsletter called ElamWorld Technology Review. Harris had seen Battle's newsletter and liked its focus: African Americans and 21st-century technology. When they bumped into each other again at a meeting of AfroSat, a group attempting to launch a communications satellite over Africa, their mutual interests made working together inevitable. "It's a small city," says Harris, "especially for blacks who are doing something."

Computers had already become a way of life for both men -- and for their families. Battle's wife is a computer programmer and his 6-year-old daughter a grad of ComputerTots, computer education classes for children in day care and grade school. Harris's two preschool sons fight over who gets to play Mickey's ABCs on the PC while he tries to dampen their mother's new enthusiasm for e-mailing him from her office. "We talk enough already," he deadpans.

Battle and Harris know they and their families are the exception. The Washington area has so many organizations capitalizing on the Net that Fortune magazine last March called it the NetPlex. As Tony Rutkowski, executive director of the Reston-based Internet Society, puts it, "There's no place like here for information glut."

But African Americans hardly show up on-line. "The technological debate is really the cutting-edge civil rights issue of the next century," says the NAACP's Henderson. "It is important that we make ourselves not just knowledgeable but masters of it."

Henderson says opportunities on the Internet remind him of "the old gold rush days." Of Battle and Harris, he says, "these are the information wildcatters, these are the young entrepreneurs who are beginning to apply the new technology in unique ways in their communities."

But economic factors play a role. Many Internet users work at universities or businesses where the connection is free, or they can afford the hardware and connecting service fees. "We're talking about a brave new world, if you will," says Henderson. "I think it can transform the lives of ordinary citizens in ways we can just begin to imagine . . . {But} I think there is a real danger that African Americans will not participate fully."

That argument makes Battle and Harris crazy. "We've always been told as blacks that we don't have these kinds of things," says Harris. "But we can buy the cars, we can buy the clothes, and we can buy the VCRs, because that's where our interest lies."

Computer hardware capable of accessing the Internet is cheaper than a television. "There are stores that sell used computer equipment for \$175," says Battle. "You can buy a brand-new modem for \$24. And with a basic 2,400-baud modem, you can sign on to almost anything text-based on the Internet."

Mike Godwin, staff counsel of the Washington-based Electronic Frontier Foundation, a high-tech civil liberties group, also believes money isn't the biggest barrier. "It turns out to be not so much an issue of economic access to the hardware or of education or of any other factor," he says, "as much as it is getting people accustomed to thinking they need to be on-line.

"In my experience, there is no greater single factor in causing people to be on-line than their own conviction that it is necessary to be there. . . . You have to acculturate people to use this technology as a matter of course. I believe the way to proceed in increasing the African American presence on-line is to be evangelistic about it." 'Unlimited Opportunity'

In their guide to the Internet, Battle and Harris replace techno-jargon with the gospel of new technology. "It's for Joe and Jane Sixpack," says Harris. "What we're talking about is empowering individuals to know that they don't have to stay in their low-level economic positions," adds Battle. "They don't have to be ignorant of what's going around. They don't have to be shut out of the technology that's going to take place in the 21st century. They don't have to be the have-nots anymore. All they have to do is be willing to learn.

"And we say using the Internet, you have an unlimited opportunity to learn," Battle says. "There are scientists on the Internet, there are universities on the Internet, there are libraries on the Internet. You can learn anything you want to learn. You can position yourself for any job. You can rely on millions of other individuals -- black, white, whatever -- on the Internet who will be willing to help you progress out of your station.

"We're saying if you are unhappy, there is no reason to stay where you are at. Years ago, people never left their neighborhoods for anything. People on welfare were stuck. Well, now kids and adults can get on a computer and travel the entire planet. Now there is no excuse."

Battle and Harris aren't just letting the guide speak for itself. They're taking its message out into the community. They talk at black community meetings about finding jobs over the Internet. They try to convince local black merchants to take their business on-line and worldwide instead of limiting it to their small corner of the city. "Once you show someone what's possible on the Internet," says Battle, "the excitement builds. . . . You can say, It's wide open, folks. You're not limited anymore. So whatever you think you need without infringing on anyone else's rights, go for it.'

"If Dr. King were alive today," Battle says, "I think he'd take his marches onto the Internet." A Virtual City

Then there's New Elam City. Named for a highly developed civilization of color that reigned in ancient Iran from 2900 to 600 B.C., it is a virtual urban community, a cyber-city dedicated to African Americans, that Battle and Harris are building meg-by-meg to go on-line by the end of this month.

Similar to the virtual reality file-drawers scene in the movie "Disclosure," New Elam City is being designed as a digitized city-grid, home to merchandisers and shops, art galleries, college classrooms, legal counselors, a health care center, an e-mail post office, entertainment and other cultural activities.

"As you go down the street, you can go into the convention center, or you can go to the Calvin Rolark news center, or you can go to the Thurgood Marshall Law Center," says Harris, adding that tourists and cruisers will have free access and residents will pay a monthly fee for an Elam City address and special privileges. At restaurants, he explains, "you walk in and click on the dishes on a menu to see a digital picture. Then you can make a reservation on-line or order takeout or delivery. We've already got 25 confirmed retailers, including a Baskin-Robbins."

One of them is Derrick Riley, who designs, manufactures and markets Black Scents from his home office in Forestville. He sees New Elam City as a opportunity to move his air fresheners, which feature brief bios of famous African Americans on their packaging, into a larger marketplace. "I've already designed my storefront for it," says Riley, a veteran user of America Online. "It's the next new wave of reaching out to people with information about my business."

A virtual church, open 24 hours, will feature nondenominational pastoral counseling and sermons from notable ministers to which people can respond. "We're hoping to do great things there," says John Fowler, an ordained Baptist minister who will take charge of New Elam City's pulpit in addition to his role as assistant minister at Capital View Baptist Church in Northeast Washington. Besides "spreading the Gospel," Fowler, an Internet novice, says he'll be "trying to introduce computers and computer applications to a segment of the community that's normally shut out."

Meanwhile, Stafford Battle often takes the good news about the Internet to the H Street corridor in Northeast where he grew up. He talks to shop owners and street vendors about taking their goods on-line. He doesn't always get the response he wants.

"There are some of these brothers out there selling T-shirts," says Battle. "And I say You've got some great designs. You could sell your T-shirts around the world on the Internet.

"They say, We don't need that.' They say, That's the white man's thing. We don't need technology.' "

Battle shakes his head like he can't believe what he's hearing, like he can't understand how anyone doesn't see the opportunities he sees. "I tell them this technology is for all of our use," he says. "I tell them they'll learn the hard way. I say, I'll give you what I have, but if you're going to slam the door, there are other people out there who will listen.' " CAPTION: Stafford Battle, left, and Rey Harris with their "African American Resource Guide to the Internet." "The revolution will not be televised, it will be digitized," says Battle.



