



Access will determine how quickly we cross the digital divide, writes Tanya Accone.

Cyberspace has been touted as a colour-blind, non-racial neighbourhood, a place where the colour barrier is dissolved and where we can all hang out harmoniously. Surely this must be the case, for in our anonymous interactions with users, race, gender and other identifiers are of no consequence. Or are they? Does race simply vanish in a virtual world?

The web is a place of culture and commerce unique in that it is not imbued with any particular group's sense of self or worth. It is a medium whose short history is studded with examples of its ability to successfully foster special interests, provide a haven for community, act as a powerful political tool and fulfil its promise in the field of education.

But almost any way you examine it, segregation seems to be as much a part of cyberspace as any other reality, virtual or otherwise. There is no denying that until fairly recently, the web was a world dominated by white concepts, content and

is the web a white place?

creativity, and a resulting questionable intellectual culture. And the real tragedy of the medium is that those who stand to gain most, are least likely to have access.

The discrepancies between those on either side of the digital divide are dire. Teledensity favours the wealthy urban elite, and the basic cost of a personal computer is often multiples of the annual income of the average African citizen.

Even in South Africa, which has two thirds of Africa's total online population, the AMPS figures do not record a statistically significant number of blacks (or any race group other than whites) online. Internet use is greatest among those earning more than R9 000 a month and PC purchasing power goes to those who earn in excess of R4 000 a month.

Until recently, blacks still constituted a disproportionately small sector of the online population in the United States. In fact, until 1999, the trend indicated that the digital divide appeared to be widening. Today the black-white gap is not so predictable. Asian-Americans have the highest Internet and computer use, followed by whites, blacks and then Latinos who trail the pack.

Blacks at most income levels continue to be less likely to be online than white Americans, although they are increasingly going online and spending on computer-related products.

"I don't feel there is much of a divide anymore," said NetNoir co-founder David Ellington, who believes that the divide is more economic than race-related. "The Internet is now becoming relevant in our lives."

Recently *Salon Magazine* broached the issue, querying whether the medium was somehow intrinsically racist or whether the reasons were purely economic. An article in it proposed that African-Americans aren't rushing online because the new medium butts heads with their traditional values and desires.

As in other facets of life, the net has failed to account for and embrace the black experience – there are still only half-a-dozen black-interest portals in the US.

Last year, Robert Johnson, founder of Black Entertainment Television, launched a \$35 million African-American portal site in a bid to mend the digital divide. He was yet another evangelist in a long line which includes the likes of Ellington, Blackvoices' Barry Cooper and Afronet's Willie Atterbery.

"There's no question that a key factor in keeping people online is that they have a compelling experience," says marketing researcher Donna Hoffman. "Obviously, if content is not there, they're not going to stay online."

Some thinkers have posed a chicken-egg conundrum: if the reason for black Internet absence is that fewer blacks have access to computers, then, in turn, there are fewer people to

produce creative, black content and, ultimately, less incentive for blacks to be online in the first place.

Others, like former *PC Magazine* editor Joel Dreyfuss, respond by questioning the value of creating Afrocentric sites. "What I don't want to do is let everybody else off the hook – 'Well the blacks have their sites, therefore we can just do our thing'."

Perhaps this situation is unsurprising considering that most content producers represent an amalgamation of two sectors traditionally the preserve of whites: technology and the print media. Adding to this towering inequality are issues such as economics and education.

Yet communication has been highlighted as the key driver behind Africa's economic and social development by governments, NGOs, businesses, investors and the United Nations. Africa is perhaps the one place on earth where the will to wire (or wireless) is greatest.

In July, a group of high-tech executives at the World Economic Forum urged the world's wealthiest nations to take action against the 'digital divide' between the developed/information haves and developing/information have-nots – resulting in a project called Opportun!TY.

Despite the perception of the continent, Africa is being wired and progress is being made. The difference lies in the fact that the pace of progress is far slower than in other parts of the developing world, such as Asia.

Many have characterised investing in Africa's Internet future as 'a leap of faith' and it is a commitment that few organisations share. Most of the continent is being wired by NGO initiatives and a handful of companies who are actively driving its development.

Local 'infopreneurs' have taken up the challenge to ensure that Africans are not left on the roadside of the informa-

tion highway. New portal and access deals are characterised by partnerships and joint-ownership of these modern means of production, and content development is being encouraged and driven from a local level, going against the grain of new media colonialism and globalisation.

Empowerment and entrepreneurship in the information technology industry have given birth to a new diversity of online initiatives ranging from culture and community hubs such as IZANIA.com through to black-owned online trading ventures such as Legae Direct. These are all steps in the right direction.

The continent is fertile, eager and more than ready. However, the most significant challenges lie ahead. Investment, infrastructure and enterprise are just some of the hoops to be negotiated before the medium can fulfil the role of providing a non-racial virtual space for the people of Africa.

■ Tanya Accone is Executive Producer of M-Web. She was previously Internet Editor of the *Sunday Times*.



MIRRIAM MAZUNGULA
b. 1969

Umthi uphamb' inyanga – The medicine has tricked the medicine man

I have shown Makana as the warrior going into war with all the other warriors that would die because of the British bullets. Makana made a big mistake, but we must forgive him for this and move into a brighter future where we can talk to each other peacefully and not fight each other.



IZANIA.com ... a step in the right direction.