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New Media Technology: oppression in the modern world

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Senior Thesis

New Media Technology: Oppression in the Modern World

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Senior Seminar
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Epigraph:

"If we continue to develop our
technology without wisdom or
prudence, our servant may prove
to be our executioner."
-- Omar N. Bradley

Abstract

New media technology is now present everywhere in our society. This technology has a large impact on individuals with and without access to it. In the following paper, I will discuss issues of access and new media technology from history to present day. This is an effort to combine both of my majors – Sociology and Communications – into a work which could easily be expanded upon for graduate studies. By briefly reviewing the history of new media technology as well as historically outlining minority group oppression in the United States, correlations will be suggested between the development of technology and oppression. A variety of theories within this text explain why oppression and technology are related. Since the basis of this text falls under the umbrella of Liberation Sociology – sociology that seeks not only to understand the world in which we live and participate, but also to change it – recommendations are offered in an effort to change the repeating minority oppression within the United States.

Introduction:

Communication is the core of society. Human relationships are based on many forms of communications; from interpersonal to corporate, understanding between individuals cannot exist without communication. Historically, communication has gone through many stages of development. From symbols and language to writing and radio/television developments, communication has been constantly morphing into different forms. Presently, we are living within a communications revolution. The communications industry, as well as society, is being shaped by what is referred to as new media technology. Social structure is being affected now more than ever because of the interdependence between society, technology, and the information that is provided through technology (Mirabito, 1997). In fact, the recent technology boom is unlike anything ever seen. The Internet is one of the greatest phenomena of technological history. Only a small number of academics had heard about the Internet in 1990, and only a decade later in 2000, there was an estimated 385 million people who used the Internet to communicate daily. "Never has any new invention shot from obscurity to global fame in quite this way" (Cairncross, 2001:75).

The Internet, like other more recent communication tools, is more than a means of relationship building; it also communicates through providing information. Consequently, the popularity of the Internet can be attributed to the availability of information it provides. Along with access to information, another attractive quality of the Internet is that, theoretically, it is open to all to use without membership or a waiting list. Therefore mass quantities of information, only previously offered to a few elite members of society,

can be transmitted to anyone, regardless of position or class. Is this prospect too good to be true? In the eyes of many, the answer is yes.

History reveals that there has been a continual oppression of minority groups, especially African Americans, by much of the white majority. In fact, the United States has been built on the shoulders of oppressed peoples. It started with the oppression of the Native Americans by the first European settlers, moved through the time of southern slavery, and then moved into the present day subtleties; historically, oppression has always been prevalent in the United States in a large variety of ways.

Traditionally, the white majority has been the recipient of societal advances and new forms of technology. All too often, minority groups within the United States, especially African Americans, have been left behind because they lack the resources to keep up with the mostly white majority. This lack of resources is derived from the oppression that has been present ever since African Americans were brought to the United States as slaves. The repression of resources experienced by the African American minority group has never fully equalized, even after hundreds of years. Instead of disappearing, oppression simply morphed into less recognizable forms. Presently, new media technology, specifically the Internet, is the latest commodity which the majority has access to, but a significant amount of the African American minority does not.

Finding the answer to the question of whether or not new advances in technology have kept this divide strong is important for understanding the correlation between previous and present day oppressive activity. Recent technological advances have developed quickly, so quickly, in fact, that the divide between the "haves" and the "have-nots" is undeniable.

Certain questions have to be answered in order to come to a conclusion on this issue. The aim of my text is to answer some of the following questions. How has oppression of African Americans changed over history? What are the major milestones for communications development? What is the relationship between the advances in media technologies and oppression of the African American minority group? Does the African American minority lack resources to actively participate in the new global communities that are forming through the Internet? If so, is the problem rooted in institutional structures?

Reasoning behind these questions is based in my convictions as a sociologist following the tradition of Liberation Sociology, which hinges on the words of Marx in his *11th Thesis on Feuerbach*, 1888, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; the point is to change it." To make a difference in society, one must first have a grasp of how culture and humanity work together. In the present age of advancements, James Slevin notes that social theorists have, "neglected to study comprehensively the development of the Internet and the way it enmeshes with the cultural transformations associated with modern society" (2000; 4). Therefore, it is the goal of this text to provide a strong platform for looking at how the culture of technology intertwines with the social issue of oppression for the purpose of making a difference.

Hypotheses:

Currently within society, there appears to be a link between access to technology and ethnic composition. The white demographic with the capability to access technology and embrace its benefits seems to dominate the Internet. The result is the emergence of a

new type of oppression. Lacking access, the general African American population is unable to reap the benefits of the Internet. Consequently, this results in a social class divide between the technologically advanced and groups not yet up to speed with the available technology.

However, this possible correlation between communication advancements and oppression may not be as novel as our present society would like to assume. Quite believably, each development in communication technology throughout history has done the same. The powerful white majority, purposefully excluding the minority groups, has intended the final product strictly for their use. Ultimately, oppression and technological advancements have a lengthy history.

Presently, without this resource – the Internet – the African American population, along with other minority groups within the United States, is unable to participate in the online relationships, which foster community throughout the globe. This new, exciting area of social engagement has the capacity to broaden horizons and educate individuals more completely than conventional education has done in the past. Today, relationships are being formed that would otherwise never have been possible, because of the communications tools available to society. Now barriers of time zones and spaces are being broken. Numbers of individuals being reached through new technology would have been unfathomable years before. Contact to another country across the globe no longer has to be experienced through extensive travel, expensive phone calls, or the lengthy process of the postal service; now it can be experienced through the use of the Internet. These communities that are built, and the opportunities they provide, should be available to all demographics within the United States.

To make this work suitable for this assignment it was necessary to limit research to one specific minority group, African Americans. Likewise, since my focus is on the United States, the technological history dating back further than the establishment of America does not apply. This information is inapplicable since these advances developed before the colonization of the United States. The focus time period will be from the end of the Civil War in 1865 to the present. Advances I will be touching on are: telephone, radio, television, computers and Internet access. Reasons behind this choice are not only based on the relational aspect of these communication tools but also the information these means of communication provide. Expanding on this piece in the future, perhaps as a dissertation, would allow other early developments, such as automobiles to be intertwined.

Methodology:

The majority of this text is based on historical research. Through scholarly study of the past, present challenges and conflicts become more comprehensible. David C. McCullough has a firm grasp of this: "History is a guide to navigation in perilous times. History is who we are and why we are the way we are" (2003; <http://www.wisdomquotes.com>). Two historical areas are core aspects to this text: the history of technological advances and the history of the oppression of African Americans both within the sphere of the United States.

Current literature is also used in the effort to understand the relationship between technology and oppression. Most of the current information is in the form of books and periodical articles. The information available pertaining to this area of study is not

comprehensive to date. Many researchers and academics disagree in their opinions concerning the effect technology has on oppression. It is significant to note that a writer or researcher's opinion on this issue depends on his or her primary field of study.

Generally, individuals equated to technology and media studies are more optimistic about its effects on society, while sociologists and other writers of human commentary tend to lean to the negative side of the spectrum. This is important to note for a few reasons. It reveals that people, even in their efforts not to take a specific side, cannot be completely impartial. This lack of neutrality, though not intentional, has major effects on the kind of information gathered, which could seriously skew a study. Ultimately, cross discipline research is increasingly valuable in light of these biases.

Along with the extensive literature review, secondary data from the United States Department of Commerce's (USDC) National Telecommunications and Information Administration will be utilized. The data included in the USDC's *Falling Through the Net: Toward Digital Inclusion* is useful because it is the most recent set of numbers relating to the Internet and who the "haves" and "have-nots" are within the United States. Race, gender, and economic status are just three of the areas included in this data set. Another advantage of using this set of information is that it is part of a series study with three previous pieces, each focusing on the "digital divide."

Sociological theory is also important to incorporate in this body of work. It provides the framework necessary to make sense out of the secondary data and the information provided in the literature review. While analyzing and correlating the information obtained through research receives the majority of attention in this text,

sociological theory explains the relationships that are discovered as well as provides legitimacy to the claims to which the found information lends itself.

Applied Theories:

The sheer number of applicable theories for this text is overwhelming. To include all the theories that apply would not do justice to them, nor would they be utilized effectively. Therefore, focus will be placed on a select group of theories most pertinent to this body of work: ethnomethodology, Marxist ideas on class struggles, governmentality, critical theory, symbolic interactionism, and structural oppression.

Ethnomethodology:

Developed by Harold Garfinkel, ethnomethodology is a recent perspective in sociological theory. Ethnomethodology, by definition is, “the study of ordinary members of society in the everyday situations in which they find themselves and the ways in which they use commonsense knowledge, procedures, and considerations to gain an understanding of, navigate in, and act on those situations” (Ritzer; 2003, 154). In essence, this text is an ethnomethodological study.

The world is chaotic and disorganized; therefore individuals are forced to try to make sense of what occurs. Seemingly, levels of inequality should be diminishing in the United States, especially after the amount of time that has passed since the advances of the Civil Rights movement. While outright discrimination and racism may be harder to find, statistics reveal that oppression continues through the subtleties of economics and access to technology. While the information gathered is secondary data and analysis, they are still accounts – ways which actors explain specific situations – that can be used

in an effort to understand both the Internet and oppression. The section on current literature is an effort to provide the best possible ethnomethodological view without doing primary data collection and analysis.

Marxian Theory of Class Struggles:

It is obvious that the United States is a capitalist society. The upper and lower class can be equated to the capitalist class and the proletariat class of which Marx speaks. Under Marx's ideas, the capitalist class rule over the proletariat because the capitalist have control of the wealth and resources in that society. Therefore, the lower class has no choice but to work for the upper class, and as Ritzer notes, "The capitalists get the lion's share of the rewards and the workers get barely enough to subsist on" (2003; 24).

It is important to note that under Marx's idea neither the upper nor the lower classes are consciously aware of the exploitation that is taking place in society. Instead, society operates under a false conscious, the workers believe they are being treated fairly, the capitalist are being rewarded for their cleverness and ability to advance the capitalistic market. Ultimately, the lower class has the ability to waken to the reality of the exploitation that is happening; there state of oppression allows them to see through the façade they thought was correct. This awakening must lead to what Marx refers to as praxis; "concrete action in order to overcome capitalism" (Ritzer; 2003, 25).

This theory is used to show the current class split that is seen in the United States concerning access to new media technology. Individuals of society with money and power are the ones who have the capability to use the Internet and develop that skill area. The benefits of money and power are continually perpetuated within that group. Like the

quote above implies, the upper class receive all the benefits from society while the lower class get enough just to survive.

More often than not, those that see the problems of the current situation are the ones who call for change concerning the availability of technology; the group without access. They essentially awaken to the exploitation that is created through lack of access, and know that they need to show others what they see in order for changes to be made.

Governmentality:

The concept of governmentality is drawn from the postmodern tradition, and one of postmodern theory's most distinguished devotees, Michel Foucault. Governmentality is defined as, "The practices and techniques by which control is exercised over people" (2003; 236). Mostly commonly, this control is enforced by the government or state over its citizens, but also it can be utilized by organizations and representatives unrelated to the state. Foucault takes an interest in the way conduct is governed, individuals are regulated, and ways in which self is established (2003).

In light of this text, the Internet, or more specifically the lack of access to the Internet, can be seen as a tool used to exercise power over certain groups in the United States. The fact that the Internet is not available to all members of society means those oppressed members are less able to obtain information and skills that would allow for advancement within the present social structure. Individuals can be more easily regulated and governed when they lack the knowledge to change the current oppressive structure. Parties in control seem to understand that power resources, such as the Internet, provide oppressed sections of society longing to increase their status. As Foucault believes, "There is a clear link here among knowledge, technology, and power" (2000; 599).

Therefore, it is clear that the African American population is being oppressed through lack of access to the Internet. This demographic is not only unable to utilize this resource, but also they cannot develop skills that would increase their status and power within society.

Critical Theory:

The Frankfurt School of critical theory developed in Germany, which was officially founded February 23, 1923, consisted of a group of Neo-Marxists who were dissatisfied with the present state of Marxian theory. The Frankfurt school has grown beyond its roots in Europe to influence American sociology. As Ritzer says in his book, *Sociological Theory*, "Critical theory is composed largely of criticisms of various aspects of social and intellectual life, but its ultimate goal is to reveal more accurately the nature of society" (2000; 276). Of the major social critiques the Frankfurt school makes, the critique of modern society – particularly technology – is useful in regard to this body of work.

While early Marxian theory's critique of modern society was based on the economy, the Frankfurt school based its ideas on, "the cultural level in light of what it considers the realities of modern capitalist society" (Ritzer; 2000, 277). While the issue is still about maintaining power, the dominating class's tool for keeping control has shifted from the economy into the cultural arena. Therefore, the focus of the critical school is the occurrence of cultural repression of individuals within the context of modern society (Ritzer; 2000).

Critical theory's critique of culture is based on the "culture industry," which is the "bureaucratized structures that control society"; these structures include conglomerates that control many aspects of media including: television networks, record labels, news outlets, and movie studios (Ritzer; 2000, 279). The culture industry is a reflection of Marx's idea of superstructure, only the focus is not economic.

The previous aspects of critical theory can be directly equated to the current role new media technology plays in the modern world. In the days of early critical theorists the major disseminators of culture to society were newspapers, magazines, and the rather new forms of entertainment movies and radio broadcasts. While presently those forms of media play important roles, there are newer, more powerful disseminators of mass culture, most popularly television and the Internet (Ritzer; 2003). While the previous forms of media gave critical theorists reasons to be concerned, the newer media outlets provide far more reason to be concerned.

Critical theory does not speak specifically about lack of access, at least in those terms. Instead, critical theory critiques modern technology under the following premise: technologies control people, rather than people controlling technology. Continuing on, Ritzer notes, "The main thrust of the work of the critical school was to argue that it was not technology per se that was the problem, but the way technology was deployed and employed by capitalism. Thus, the capitalist used technology to control people, deaden their critical capacities, and greatly limit their ability to revolt against this inherently exploitative system" (2000; 118). Today in the United States, the economically powerful, which statistics show are mostly whites, are using their access to new media technology to control the low-income populations, which are mainly minority groups.

If the United States continues to foster this kind of oppression, the result will be what Herbert Marcuse calls “one-dimensional society”. Essentially, individuals would lose the ability create and actively participate in the larger structures of technology because of a complete loss of critical thinking skills. Currently in America, this type of society is forming and individuals are no longer concern with how a task is accomplished, as long as the result is timely and efficient. This technocratic thinking is the beginning of a dangerous road toward societal oppression, which will affect everyone, not just minority groups. Hope lies in the creation of a society where human values take precedence over efficiency, and people control technology instead of being controlled by it (Ritzer; 2003).

Symbolic Interactionism:

As a social theorist, George Herbert Mead has crossed the discipline divide. Much of his work has been integrated into other areas of study; specifically he made a large impact on communications theory. Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism states that meaning is created and sustained through groups (Griffin; 2003). More specifically, this theory’s ideas about learning mean, symbols, action, and interaction are extremely applicable to this text.

First, it is important to establish that within this text, use of the Internet as a communication tool is seen as a social interaction – this will be supported later in the text. With this understood, we can easily see how Mead’s theory applies. Social interaction allows humans to learn symbols and these symbols allow people to: actively participate in the world, deal with the social environment, improve ability to perceive, improve ability to think, increase ability to solve problems, transcend time, space, as well

as their own lives, and imagine metaphysical reality, i.e. heaven and hell. Ritzer points out that a, “Symbolic interactionist’ primary concern is with the impact of meanings and symbols on human action and interaction” (2000; 360).

A significant portion of the population is missing out on the interaction the Internet provides. This lack of access to the symbols and created meanings of the Internet is in a sense, oppression. Individuals unable to participate in these areas have less capability to exist in the global community that many people are arguing society is coming to. Also, oppressed individuals without access are unable experience a fullness of meaning available in life that the Internet brings to people of privilege.

Structural Oppression:

According to structural oppression theories, certain groups are able to benefit directly from using, controlling, and oppressing another group of people. Power arrangements and social structure are a result of history. It is important to note that structural oppression is concerned with oppression of the “other,” which goes beyond just race and gender. The “other” consists of any individual kept out of power arrangements and opportunity structures. While Ritzer’s sociological theory book uses gender as a way to understand structural oppression, I believe it can just as easily be equated to race; therefore I will rearrange the definitions and examples he uses to coincide with race. The more specific structural oppression theory that I will draw from is intersectionality theory.

Intersectionality theory hinges on the understanding that individuals (in this case, African Americans) experience oppression in varying degrees. After it has been established that all African Americans experience some form of oppression, the variation

of oppression is based on other social arrangements such as income and education. “Theories of intersectionality at their core understand these arrangements of inequality as hierarchical structures based in unjust power relations” (Ritzer; 2000, 471). The government, however, fail to see the inequality of the structure system because they choose to view it through, what some may call, “rose colored glasses.” Those in power tend to avoid self-evaluation and remain ignorant to the class differentiation and oppression that is occurring, most likely because admitting to the structural oppression would put their positions of power in jeopardy.

This theory is supported through the historical and statistical research in this text. White members of society have historically benefited from keeping the African American members of society from advancing. This is seen through the provision of cheap labor and white individual’s advancement to higher economic status. Even in current society, through oppressing African Americans, whites are able to maintain the control they have over most areas of society, such as politics and the business world.

History of Technological Advances:

The advent of a new technologies movement is not as new as we may think. Since the beginning of time there have been communications revolutions. As Brian McNair, states in his essay about new technology and media, “the history of the mass media is a history of technological development with profound social consequences and implications at every stage” (1998; 173). Society has always been faced with new, more powerful means of reaching its members. Consider the improvement in communications at the time when roads were first being built. These roads meant that couriers reached destinations quicker, giving a new speed to the then current communications process.

Also reflect on the revolutionary days of the printing press. This invention turned the world of communication upside down. Books were no longer a luxury of the rich; increasingly, everyone could own books. As more lower class individuals were acquiring books, literacy levels improved dramatically. Literacy improvements affected the postal service. The postal systems were now delivering to a larger number of people; more people than ever before could write letters.

Similarly, the advent of the telephone in 1876 made it possible for communication to happen more quickly, over many miles. Built similarly to the telegraph, the telephone transmitted voices rather than signals. The Bell system organizers understood the technology of this invention, but failed to see the social implications that came along with such a tool; people wanted to use the phone to socialize. The rising popularity of telephones was due in part to the fact that the voice transmission was able to aid emotional communication as well as the fact that telephones were able to provide user-to-user communication without the need for intermediaries.

Lower income families, unable to afford their own phone line; but desiring not to be left out of the revolution, were willing to participate in party lines. Party lines allowed two to ten residences to share the same telephone line and number. Though this was extremely inconvenient, the luxury of having a phone service at a rate which could be afforded made it worth the inconveniences. As the telephone network expanded between 1894 and 1920, middle class individuals began paying for the service in their homes as well. 13 million telephones were in use by 1920, working out to be 123 telephones for every 1,000 people (Cowan; 1997).

Radio evolution began with experimental wireless transmissions in 1895 by Guglielmo Marconi in Italy. By June 2, 1896, Marconi filed a patent in England for a system of wireless communication. Radio technology began to take speed, and on December 12, 1901, using Morse code, the first transatlantic wireless transmission between Cornwall, England and St. John's, Newfoundland was made. In 1903, after Valdemar Poulsen invented a means of producing continuous waves by "arc transmission," which were later used to construct high-frequency alternators for sending radio waves, it was only a matter of time until radios and radio broadcasting would become available to the public as a mass market (Cowan; 1997).

By the fall of 1916, a plan was envisioned to develop the radio into a household utility, just like the piano or phonograph. The vision of profit gained from radio was based on manufacturing and selling radio music boxes for singular household use. Broadcasts consisting of more than music would also add to the potential market gain of radio. In 1920, a store began to run advertisements for wireless receiving sets, and by February 1922 the Department of Commerce was issuing up to twenty-four licenses a month for radio transmission.

There was a boom in the sales of radios and radio parts. In 1922, 60 million dollars worth of radios and radio related parts were sold, only for the dollar amount to reach 136 million in 1923. The radio business was in full swing with individuals all over the country tuning in and striving to be a part of the new technological phenomena that took the country by storm. The early history of radio matched up with what would be the next wave in entertainment and advances for the United States, television (Cowan; 1997).

In 1920, electrical experts from a number of countries began to experiment with various ways to translate images into electromagnetic signals. These signals then could be projected into the atmosphere or transmitted through wires. Both the mechanical and electrical developments of television were expensive, tedious, and hard. But on September 11, 1928, the world of television as we now know it was set in motion; the first melodrama was broadcast.

Though the commercialization of television was delayed because of the Great Depression and World War II, the intellectual elite knew that just as radio surpassed newspapers, soon television would surpass radio. Inventors and people in power knew the influence behind this new communications tool. Ruth Cowan notes in her book, *A Social History of American Technology*, "Television had an extraordinary popular appeal, and it spread rapidly throughout the country, encouraged by the general expansion of the American economy after World War II" (1997; 290). In just fourteen years, American families with television sets soared from 8,000 households in 1946 to 45.7 million households by 1960.

These revolutions in technology changed social relationships in a major way, but nothing would be able to match the growth and speed that came from the development of computers and the Internet. Computer development started as early as the 1940s when engineers were working in laboratories to create complex calculators. In fact, by the end on 1947, various laboratories in the United States and Britain were working to construct up to at least nine computers. These computers were nothing like the machines that we know today. Overwhelming amounts of space was necessary for these massive machines. But since the first systems were built under governmental contract, and the computer

industry was so competitive, a large number of skilled individuals were able to learn about the development of this technology. Cowan notes; “because so many young people received training in computer design under various governmental contracts, the pace of innovation in computers was probably faster than in any other previous technological domain” (1997; 297).

Each generation of computers were developed over a lesser amount of time, with their capabilities continuing to grow faster, more powerful, less expensive, and more flexible. Binary instructions lead to computer languages, which eventually lead to the prepackaged programming we all know and use today. Memories and speed increased, while size of these machines decreased greatly. By the 1980s the new frontier for computers was personal ownership, and since then that frontier has been a reality for an increasing number of people (Cowan; 1997).

The advances, as we know, do not stop with personal ownership of computers. The Internet’s development parallels the development of the computer. The Cold War and fear of nuclear conflict loomed in the minds of the government, along with the race for technological advances – i.e., the space race. Under this premise ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network) was created. Originally a network to allow computers to communicate with each other about defense and governmental information, this network’s first transformation was to link together university campuses. Slowly this network turned to linking other academic and research organizations, and by the 1980s businesses were also being linked to one another. As the 1990s hit, smaller organizations also participated in this network. The mid-1990s brought an onslaught of

web browsing software, and personal computer owners began to participate in the boom (Slevin; 2000, 28-37).

History of African American Oppression in the United States:

African American history in the United States is a rich area of study that far predates the Civil War. In fact, American ideas about racial relations can be traced back to Elizabethan England, where much of the preconceived ideas about race formed in the minds of early colonialists (Turner; 1992, 12). However, to extensively trace this history back before the United States Civil War era, even to its pre-American roots, is a great task, which cannot be done justice within this text. By picking up African American history at the end of the Civil War, as it progresses into the Reconstructionist period, and following it through to present day, an argument can be made: as advances in freedom for African Americans occurred, oppression seeped into society in different, more subtle ways. Meaning, though it seemed that the problem of oppression was dissolving, it actually was being maintained or even increasing, just doing so in ways that were less obvious than it had been in the past.

The ratification of the thirteenth amendment to the United States Constitution in December 1865 barring slavery turned the issue from freeing of the slaves to the question of what status ex-slaves should sustain. These questions only increased with President Andrew Johnson in power. As Levine points out in his book about the history of the African American civil rights struggle, "The Johnson state governments tried to restore blacks to virtual slavery" (1996; 95). Johnson did this through a number of ways. First, he

announced the end of the reconstruction period and issued pardons to the south's elected officials so they could take office. Secondly, laws known as Black Codes were instituted. These codes enabled marriage between blacks, allowed them to own, buy, and sell property, and also allowed them to sue and be sued. While these rights were a step in the right direction, the rest of the Black Codes were the reverse. Blacks were prevented from sitting on juries, testifying against whites, and some codes even required blacks to sign yearly labor contracts which provided punishment for individuals who left their employment before the contract expired. This was all in an effort to prevent blacks from obtaining better employment terms through the process of bargaining. In some states, such as South Carolina, the Black Codes were particularly oppressive; blacks were required to work from dawn until dusk, unable to leave the plantation or have visitors without the plantation owner's permission (Levine; 1996).

Vagrancy laws, which were enacted in prewar Maryland and Delaware, popped up in the south after the Civil War. These laws allowed local authorities to remove black children from families with "unfit" parents and place them under the care of white guardians. Along with the laws that allowed the use of convicts for labor, whites were provided with cheap or even free labor. Violence against blacks continued, militiamen, old confederate soldiers, and even private citizens worked to keep blacks down. Johnson's administration failed to protect the black members of the population

Southern whites, in their effort to keep down the blacks, went too far. The Northern population, along with a large majority of the congressional Republicans, hung onto the belief that the Civil War, with its huge sacrifices, has not been fought to allow the Confederate leaders to obtain power and restore the old plantation system, and at

worst start another civil war. Instead, Congress refuted the declaration made by Johnson stating that Reconstruction was over. Congress appointed a Joint Committee on Reconstruction to assess the conditions of the South (Levine; 1996).

The end of the southern war of oppression was far from over. The government continued to be revamped, and in March the Civil Rights Act of 1866 was passed in Congress over Johnson's veto. This act allowed all persons born in the United States to be national citizens. Along with citizenship the act, "guaranteed citizens equal protection of person and property and authorized U.S. officials to safeguard these rights by bringing suit in federal court" (1996; 96). Shortly after, in June 1866, Congress sent the fourteenth amendment to be ratified, and for the first time in U.S. history black members of the population were recognized as citizens with equal rights before the law (Levine; 1996, 97).

In the early months of 1867, Congress provided blacks with the right to vote in Washington D.C. and its territories. By 1868 the fourteenth amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution, with the Fifteenth amendment prohibiting the government from denying anyone the right to vote, "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude," to be ratified in 1870. With these rights established, many of the Reconstructionists believed their job was complete. However, many issues existed that would take a long time to be worked through in the United States, more specifically issues relating to segregation. Black governmental delegates wanted states to be required to allow equal access to public transportation as well as public accommodations, such as restaurants and hotels. These issues would continue to be a source of concern and conflict even up until the 1960s (Levine; 1996).

From the 1880s until the early 1900s, there was a regression in the advances that had been made by the African American. Levine calls this regression a transition into, “new, extreme forms of racism” (1996; 109). To ensure that blacks were no longer a strong political force, steps were being taken to pass laws that would prevent blacks from being elected in to important posts, specifically in areas where the majority of the voters were black. Occasionally, black politicians would receive appointments for offices, but this was under the whim of white political leaders and not for the interest of the black population.

Along with this political block, new laws were being enacted and racial violence was increasing. Three decades after Reconstruction, Jim Crow slowly began to follow the pattern that black disfranchisement did, but as the 1890s hit, it rapidly extended to just about every area of contact between blacks and whites. “Until that late 1890s, railroad car segregation was the only form of racial separation required by law in a majority of southern states” (Levine; 1996, 115). Many Jim Crow laws were passed at the same time however, and it was done with the support of the U.S. Supreme Court. The intense racism throughout the country had a hand in clearing the path for segregation to happen in the south. Soon everything, from streetcars to ticket lines, were segregated.

Along with the commonality of a segregated society, violence was also a common part of life for black Americans. Hoke Smith, in his 1906 campaign for governor of Georgia, called for black disfranchisement. His campaign unleashed a wave of antiblack sentiments; the Atlanta press even ran reports calling for lynching and reestablishment of the Ku Klux Klan. Violence continued to increase, and in August 1908 a race riot broke out in Springfield Illinois. Mobs of white people went on a rampage, lynching, flogging,

and destroying property. Blacks and whites alike were shocked with the violence, and in February 1909 a group of whites and blacks asked interested citizen, to come to a meeting for the “discussion of present evils, the voicing of protests, and the renewal of the struggle for civil and political liberty” (Levine; 1996, 135). The first meeting took place on June 1, 1909, and by the second meeting, May 12 – 14, 1910, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was established. During its first years of being instituted, the organization experienced significant growth.

The NAACP increased in its impact and by 1914 many of the supporters of segregation began to lose their influence in the Wilson administration, and the Treasury Department began to reverse the Jim Crow policies. As the United States moved through World War I and the Great Depression, the struggles for African Americans continued. Battles for rights were won and lost and by World War II discrimination against blacks still continued to be a pervasive aspect of life in America. Protests continued from the NAACP and private citizens and on February 1, 1960, four black college students made history when they sat at a whites-only lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina demanding service. These actions began a new era of the Civil Rights revolution in the United States. They sparked a direct movement against discrimination, bringing the struggle for equal rights to the streets and courthouses across the country (Levine; 1996).

Students from all over the United States began to participate in sit-ins, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed to join other groups in their efforts to win this war of discrimination once and for all. By the beginning of the 1960s, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was acknowledged as the leader of the nonviolent, direct action campaign for civil rights. Demonstrations were organized, and

the police made mass arrests of participants. While in police custody, demonstrators were beaten and mistreated, and since this mistreatment occurred in prisons, it was out of the view of the reporters and television cameras. As tensions mounted and demonstrations continued to occur, the violence against the civil rights protestors soon began to happen in front of the cameras. A prime example occurred on May 3, 1963, when Birmingham, Alabama police were ordered to use high-pressure fire hoses, nightsticks and even dogs against not only adult demonstrators but also children. The footage from this event went out as a shock to most white Americans outside of the southern United States, and even some within the south. Because of what happened that day in Alabama, support for the civil rights movement began to increase tremendously (Levine; 1996).

On June 19 of the same year, as the governor of Alabama continued to strongly support segregation, President Kennedy sent the strongest civil rights legislation since Reconstruction to Congress. This legislation attacked segregation, employment discrimination, and discrimination in federal funding. A little more than a year later, The Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed as "the broadest and strongest civil right legislation since Reconstruction" (Levine; 1996, 189). This act not only prohibited segregation in public facilities such as restaurants and hotels, but it also banned segregation in state and locally owned facilities, schools, and outlawed job discrimination.

Though the nonviolent movement against discrimination continued the fight, by the mid-1960s there were a large number of blacks beginning to reject the nonviolent struggle to create change and succeed in integration. This movement believed that to pursue integration would be to leave behind the true identity of black people and completely enter a culture that did not want them to be there. As an alternative, these

individuals proposed that “blacks should work together to build their self-pride, their own economy, and their own communities” (Levine; 1996, 195).

Tension existed within the black community between the growing anger and the progress. Levine explains it in the following way: “When long-oppressed groups finally start to win their rights, they often expect to win total victory very quickly; this is known as the ‘revolution of rising expectations.’ But when they realize that complete victory will not come immediately, frustration and bitterness set in” (1996; 195). This dichotomy of frustration and growth has crept into present society.

Since, there has been desegregation, African Americans in politics, affirmative action, and the spread and increase of African Americans into the middle and upper classes in society. Many individuals would say that the playing field has finally leveled, and oppression is not an issue any longer. Much of the evidence tells a different story: in 1992, 51 percent of blacks were unemployed; the income gap between whites and blacks widened between 1970 – 61 percent of the white level – and 1990 – 58 percent of the white level. Also 16 percent of all black over 25 years old had four or more years of college education – well below the average whites held which was 22 percent (Fairclough; 2002).

Fairclough argues in his book, *Better Day Coming* that the dispute about the state of racism in the United States is among the academic and common person alike. Some believe that the state of racism is so severe that it is likely that our nation will embark on a “Third Reconstruction,” which will attempt to complete the unfinished work of the “Second Reconstruction,” by rebuilding decaying cities and striving to eliminate poverty (2002). Fairclough quotes an African American leader from Charleston, South Carolina,

Bill Saunders, "Everything is more complicated now. Almost any issue you bring up, blacks are on both sides" (2002; 335). One of the reasons there is confusion about what is happening is because racism is now appearing in a "subtle guise," which makes it hard for the black community to work against it. Reverend L. Francis Griffin, Virginian NAACP leader twenty years ago has accurately predicted what the post-civil rights era would be like, "This is still a battleground, the line of separation still exist – but the pressures are not such that there will be... all-out fighting. It is a cold war now, and I look for it to go on" (Fairclough; 2002, 336). I stand in agreement with Fairclough when he states, "More than twenty years after the death of King, the next road – the right road – is hard to discern" (2002; 336).

Current Literature:

Virtual Community:

Researchers would be hard pressed to find people who do not believe that the Internet provides a wealth of information to those with the ability to access it. However, the question of oppression hinges on both lack of information and inability to participate in the structure and relationships that are popping up through instant messaging software and email. Therefore, discrepancies continue and arguments rage about whether or not the Internet is a valid form of social structure and human connection.

Jan Van Dijk discusses social structure on a global scale, but the information she covers can also be specified to the United States. In her book, *The Network Society*, she addresses the issue of social structure by looking at the four dimensions of social

stratification: the vertical dimension which relates social inequality to the division of power within a society, the horizontal dimension, referring media networks and social networks, and the dimension of social cohesion, asking whether or not media networks harm society by fragment social structure (Van Dijk; 1999).

Van Dijk identifies how the use of technological networks has fundamentally changed areas of Western society. First, the concept of time and space has been important with the development of a “global village,” which is what some call the increasing interconnectedness of the world through technology. Van Dijk refutes the popular idea that distance and time no longer matter, instead she believes, “The capabilities of bridging space and time enable people to be more *selective* in choosing coordinates of space and time than ever before in history” (1999; 155).

Secondly, socialization of space is addressed by considering four major social and mental consequences as well as the role of networks in this socialization. These four consequences are: upgrade of the social environment, more objective social environment, fragment of social environment, and a perceived generalization and standardization of social environments. All of these consequences argue that fundamental changes have taken place within the world of an individual’s socialization. The upgrade of social environment brings the world into an individual’s experience quickly and conveniently, therefore decreasing the significance of these things. Increases in objectivity are a result of the more direct communication possible between micro- and macro-level institutions; essentially people have more views available for consideration. The fragmentation that occurs is a result of homogeneous communities being gradually replaced by a variety of diffuse social networks. Lastly, standardization and generalization occurs under the

premise that, “the same activities are happening in ever more places” (Van Dijk; 1999, 158).

The previous consequences are argued to have disintegrated traditional communities – families, neighborhoods, et cetera – and replaced them with virtual communities, which are not constrained by the boundaries of time, place, and environment. Though these communities cannot make up for the loss of meaningful, traditional community, they instead are added to reinforce traditional community (Van Dijk; 1999).

In the text, *The Internet and Society*, James Slevin agrees with Van Dijk’s assessment of the Internet as creating new virtual communities, “The Internet is enabling the emergence of new mechanisms of human association which are shaped by – yet also shape – the development of this new medium of communication” (2000; 90). However, Slevin leans more toward the idea that these virtual communities are actually forms of meaningful traditional community, and just inherit a new face. He is not strictly optimistic about emerging virtual communities; information about problems that have emerged are also included in his discussion.

Digital Divide:

Controversy is the fuel for discussion about new media technology. The “digital divide” – a suspected gap between individuals with access to personal computers and the Internet and individuals without – has been a heavily debated topic. Generally, most people agree that some discrepancies exist between “haves” and “have nots.” The controversy lies in the disagreement of whether or not poorer neighborhoods and schools should be provided with technology (Ojeda; 2002).

One side believes that technology is a luxury item for individuals who can afford it. They point out that those who cannot personally own computers and access the Internet that way still are able to do so through school and area libraries. Michael Powell, chairman for the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) reveals his opinion by stating, "The term [digital divide] is dangerous in the sense that it suggests that the minutes a new and innovative technology comes to market there is a divide unless it's equitably distributed among every part of the society...I think there is a Mercedes divide. I'd like to have mine" (Ojeda; 2002, 17).

The opposite side views the digital divide seriously, believing that lower income citizens miss out on opportunities and information which wealthy citizens are provided with through their capability to access the Internet. Individuals standing on this side of the argument place importance on the idea of all segments of society having free access to information technology. Professor of telecommunications, Maureen Brown Yoder believes that, "until we enjoy universal access to technology, the Internet, and ideas on how to use them responsibly and productively, many people will wield an unfair advantage in their learning environment, in the job market, and in their daily lives" (Ojeda; 2002, 17).

One of the most common links in the literature about the "digital divide" is that of economic wealth and Internet access. The link between wealth and access to technology is hard to dispute; lower class Americans are beginning to use the Internet at much slower rates than middle class Americans. One study, referenced by Anthony Wilhelm in his essay about the harms of unequal access, cites research done by a marketing firm, Juniper

Communications. Their study projected that by 2005 at least half of all households earning less than \$15,000 will still be unconnected (2002; 33).

A big issue within the problem of lower income households not having access is that both adults and children are affected. In situations where lower income families cannot afford home access to the Internet, often the child's school must take up the challenge of providing that service. The U.S. Department of Education notes however, that, "In high-poverty neighborhood schools...students are much less likely to have instructional rooms connected to the Internet than are kids in more affluent, suburban communities" (Wilhelm; 2002, 34). It is certainly unfair to expect schools with run-down facilities to be the sole provider of this service to these children.

Recently, the United Nations (UN) has even gotten involved in the discussion concerning the digital divide. BBC News reports that December 10 through 12, 2003 there will be a meeting in Geneva between world leaders, activists, ministers, and business chiefs to look at technology. UN chief Kofi Annan believes it can be used to improve the lives of the millions of poor people throughout the earth. The three key issues expected to control much of the conversation are: "who should pay for technology projects in the developing world, who should control the Internet and the role of human rights" (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/3257256.stm). The conclusions that are reached during this meeting will certainly change the face of this debate for the global community as well as within individual countries.

Correlating Historically Oppression and Technology:

The reasoning behind looking at the history of these areas is to try to correlate the milestones of technological history and the history of African American oppression, in hopes that possible correlations would bring a new understanding to the relationship seen today between technology and race. Through simultaneous research in these areas, I received a more comprehensive view of both areas and how society reached its present state. However, I did not find the answers I assumed I would. The information I gathered revealed that each movement, by itself, was one large milestone with smaller points of significance developed continually within it.

First, considering the development of technology, many of the advances occurred in a manner in which they overlapped the advance before. Gaps of time seemed to be limited, if existing at all, for technology to slow down and stabilize in society before the new tool was being developed, mass produced, marketed, and sold. Second, the growth and change of oppression toward African Americans happened at a similar rate. While certain periods of time held stronger antiblack feelings, and other periods, greater support for civil rights, the overlying reality is that technology alone did not specifically increase oppression against African Americans. Individuals involved in the Civil Rights movement were more concerned about the desegregation of school and public facilities, and obtaining basic rights and representation within the government. Obtaining these more basic needs took precedence, particularly since without equal opportunity for employment and fair wages the technological advances could not possibly be enjoyed.

Rather than a correlation between racial oppression and technology, it seems to be truer that the correlation is dealing with economic oppression. After all, a major factor keeping African Americans and other groups from accessing the newest technology is

their financial standings. Historically, this economic oppression does stem from race issues; seen from post-Civil War America, former slaves had a difficult time finding jobs that would provide a wage that would sustain their families. I would venture to say that, even though historically race has played a role in African American oppression, currently access to new media technology – the Internet – is less to do with race and more to do with economics.

Current Status and Statistical Analysis:

The most current statistical data provided by the U.S. Department of Commerce reveals important information pertaining to society and Internet use. This report gives promising figures that show the overall level of digital inclusion in the United States is increasing rapidly. Households with access to the Internet increased from 26.2 percent in 1998 to 41.5 percent in 2000. As of 2000, a little over half of all households own computers. In 1998, 31.9 million individuals were online at some location. This number increased to 116.5 million in 2000. The report states that if growth continued at the rate it was going since it was published, then more than half of all Americans would be using the Internet by the middle of 2001 (Rohde; 2000).

Looking at race, specifically African Americans, by 2000 their households were twice as likely to have home access to the Internet as in 1998. Though this information is positive, large gaps still remain which are not accounted for in the considerations of income and education (See Figure I – 12 in Appendix A). According to the graph provided by the U.S. Department of Commerce, differences in overall income and educational levels only make up about half of the gap. Meaning, the gap is strictly a

racial one (2000; 15). When comparing African Americans to the national average and whites, it is seen there is a substantial disparity. While in 1998 the divide between whites and African Americans was 15 percent, numbers show that the gap increased to 18 percent in 2000. Nevertheless, researchers are hopeful when looking at the rates of expansion within the African American community. The numbers suggest that the widening of the gap will subside (Rohde; 2000, 16).

Though the above information seems to support race as a major variable for lack of access, an important issue must be taken into consideration. This racial disparity may be the remaining result of the racial oppression from slavery, which had huge economic results. Meaning that originally this divide was caused from racism, but in society today race is not the overlying factor; the economic results from racism are. Racism had colossal effects in all areas, including education and job opportunities; the present technological divide is included. I would theorize that if an improvement in African American's economic status was vigilantly pursued directly after the Civil War, many of society's problems today would not be as far reaching, or possibly even in existence.

Along with these numbers, the U.S. Department of Commerce reports the uptake of new technology is happening in most groups of Americans regardless of major factors such as race, education, and income. "Groups that have been digital "have nots" are now making dramatic gains" (Rohde; 2000, xv). Connection to the Internet in homes is happening at every income level in the United States. The middle class income homes are connecting at particularly high rates; households earning between \$35,000 and \$49,000 yearly had 46% of their population accessing the Internet in 2000. The low-income households' numbers are looking promising, in 2000 about 19% (one-fifth) of households

earned under \$15,000 yearly owned computers, which is an increase from 14.5% in 1998 (reference Figure I-7 in Appendix B).

While all the statistics provided are a good place to start understanding the digital divide, they are not sufficient enough to make concrete conclusions for this text.

However, the U.S. Department of Commerce's report concludes with an important statement, "We are approaching the point where not having access to these tools is likely to put an individual at a competitive disadvantage and in a position of being a less-than-full participant in the digital economy" (Rohde; 2000, 89). This shows that governmental organizations recognize the rapidly increasing importance associated with being able to utilize technological advances.

Conclusions:

African American oppression has gone through the gamete of changes since the years of slavery, changing from obvious forms of labor and beatings, practiced through slave owners, to the just as obvious segregation of schools and public facilities. Some of the most notable changes in oppression have been positive, such as the implementation of desegregation and affirmative action. Arguments continue to take place over what the new forms of oppression look like in the United States. The belief that racial oppression has morphed into economic oppression is a strong one. Turner in his book, *Oppression*, notes that economics is the underlying key because, "one's place in the economy determines access to valued resources, such as money, power, and prestige. The exclusion of blacks from skilled economic roles has prevented them from securing these valued resources" (1984; 66). Ultimately, the Internet has become a valued resource for

all members of society. This is supported by the U.S. Department of Commerce, "Internet access is not lover a luxury item, but a resource used by many" (Rohde; 2000, xviii).

Lacking the financial capability to use new media technology has in turn created oppression for not only African Americans, but also all peoples in low-income brackets.

As individuals, we can play a role at improving the current situation. Being active members of society is the first step. Writing to government officials about how we desire them to vote is also important. However, the most influential step we may take as individuals is to actively pursue a position about human rights that is at its core based in morality. Taking the time to speak out against the injustices present in society, and to work toward the goal of replacing traditional oppressive structures with, "totally new ones grounded in a respect for fundamental rights – including civic, political, family, and economic rights" (Feagin; 2001, 254).

The debate concerning new media technology and oppression is far from over. The areas of oppression and new media technology ultimately deserve more attention than this thesis provides. However, this text provides a good starting point for increasing understanding on the issue. Not only this, but there are some important lessons learned, and even more importantly, these problem is not without solution. Positively, improvements can and are being made. Individuals fighting for equality in the area of new media technology can take stalk in the facts presented by the U.S. Department of Commerce, that since its conception, the Internet has continued to be more accessible to each group within society. Also, it is reassuring to note that many groups are bombarding technology providers and the government with requests to continue making the Internet a

household item. With these steps constantly being made in the right direction, much of the disparity between the “haves” and the “have-nots” can be resolved.

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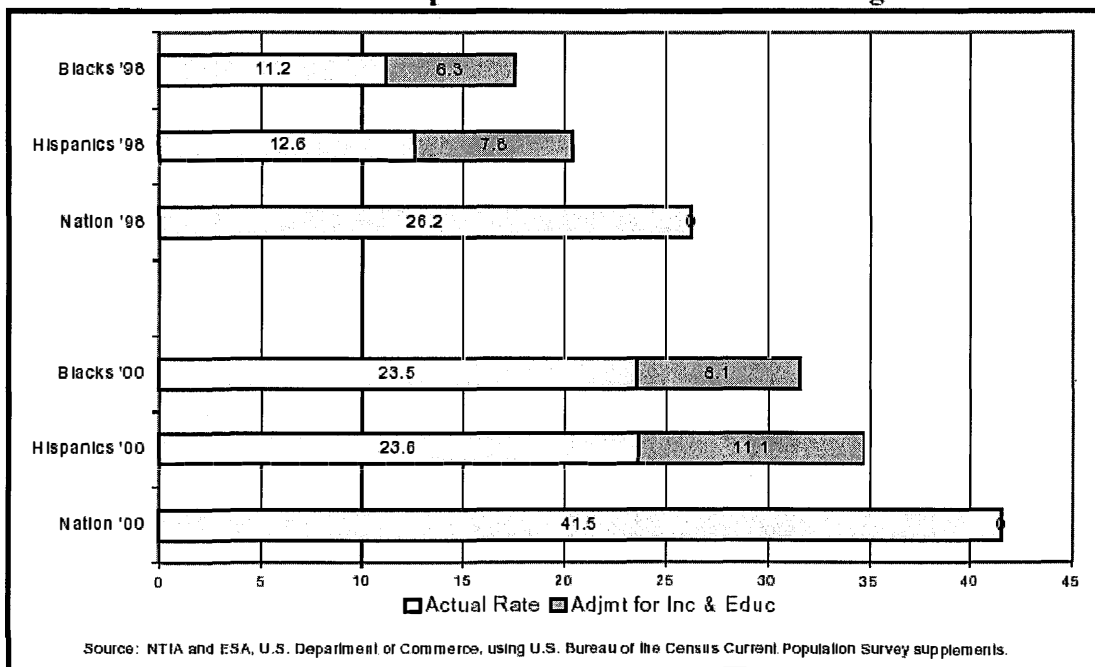
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Appendix A

Figure I-12
Income and Education Differences Account for Half of the Gap between
Blacks and Hispanics and the National Average



Appendix B

Figure I-6
Percent of U.S. Households with Internet Access
By Income (\$000s), 1998 and 2000

