

Business, Identity, and Entrepreneurship: Readings Fall 1994

During this semester, I read books about business leaders, the struggle for identity and success among Americans of differing races, and browsed through countless electronic magazines (zines) on the Internet.

At first glance, these reading materials have nothing in common. It does not take long, however, to find strong similarities between the book subjects and the electronic magazine editors. In fact, the zine editors represent the type of person who could be profiled later as a successful business leader, or as a person who found a voice.

I reviewed four books pertaining to business: *Big Blue*, about IBM; *Barbarians At The Gate*, about the leveraged buyout of RJR Nabisco; *The Big Boys*, a collection of business leader profiles; and *Rude Awakening*, about General Motors.

The next set of books discussed race relations in the United States: *Eyes On The Prize*, about the civil rights struggle; *Reflections Of An Affirmative Action Baby*, a new look at the limits of quotas; *Race*, a frank picture of urban racial harmony and disharmony; and *Children Of The Dream*, profiles and psychology of successful Blacks.

I also discovered, and wrote reviews of *Consumable*, *Computer Underground Digest*, *Info-Mac Digest*, and *Wired*--all electronic magazines available through the Internet.

Perhaps linking the world electronically is one answer to bringing innovation to stifled, monolithic corporations. Maybe the Internet can amplify the voice of people who are struggling to gain respect and equity.

If the Internet can help, however, it must be made accessible for everyone. Currently, it is available only to a small group--people affluent enough to have the computing and transmitting equipment, and savvy enough to participate.

As an excited new user on the Internet, I can't help but see the benefits of speaking out on the network. Where else can your ideas be evaluated without bias against your race, gender, education, income level, or other personal attributes? If a disenfranchised person ventures forth into the network, chances are that another person agrees, or has had the same experiences. Suddenly, the disenfranchised person has a group of peers.

One example of this is explained in a story printed in *Wired* magazine. A teenage boy, gay, stranded in a small town, felt totally alone until he started using the Internet. He found other teens like him, and created a dialogue. Now he feels

better about himself, and the dialogue helped others from despairing, even preventing one girl from committing suicide.¹

In *Children Of The Dream*, and in *Reflections Of An Affirmative Action Baby*, successful Blacks felt alienated, because they weren't accepted fully in successful White America, but could no longer fit into the lower socioeconomic web of stereotypical Black America. What if these successful Blacks, who can well afford and can certainly understand computers and the Internet, supported each other online? It is not the best solution--eliminating the barriers to acceptance is the ideal--but at least there could be a unified voice.

It doesn't take much to establish a group on the Internet. As I mentioned in my zine critiques, few editors/archivists pay much attention to correct grammar or spelling. The IDEAS are the driving force behind the zines, in either rough or more polished forms.

Much has been said in public debate about standard and non-standard pronunciation and syntax. Writing brief memos or adding to an online conversation usually doesn't contain enough text to make it sound non-standard, unless the writer is trying very hard to sound "urban," "Black," "Latino," or like any other distinctive group. I have yet to see any Black columnist write

¹Issue 2.11, p.78, "We're Teen, We're Queer, and We've Got Email"

"aks" instead of "ask" in their copy, even if they use that slang in their spoken words.

In the business books I reviewed, several profiled people complained that they had fresh ideas, but could not find a willing ear to listen. GM employees had lots of problems getting management to listen to new ideas, and the company atrophied almost into bankruptcy. What if there was a discussion group on the Internet, or several groups, to discuss new ideas and air grievances? Management still wouldn't have to listen, but perhaps they could peek at the comments and learn something.

For example, car design at GM grew more common with each year. If an engineer set up a digest of patents, similar to the way *Info-Mac Digest* lists downloaded files and fields questions, then any person with an idea could contribute. The local car dealership could have a computer in the showroom that would display an electronic suggestion box.

The idea digest could go many steps further. Local libraries, with networked computers, could let students, who may lack the funds to have expensive equipment at home, ask questions or share their ideas with contacts set up at corporations. A blind address, available using certain software, would assure that the questions and ideas were judged solely on their merit, bias-free.

The Internet, and its dialogues in the user groups, still has room for a lot of growth. Historically, where there is room to grow, people tend to cooperate better and tolerate more. What better place to establish progressive race relations?

The growth also has risks, but a common thread among successful people is their willingness to take risks. In *Barbarians At The Gate*, risk-takers pushed the business community to its limits, using the relatively new idea of financing leveraged buyouts with junk bonds. Later, after the enormous RJR Nabisco LBO, a Black entrepreneur used an LBO to purchase Borden Foods, one of the biggest transactions in business this decade. It proved that fresh ideas and a willingness to risk everything meant more than race; anyone could succeed.

In *Children Of The Dream*, successful Black business leaders had many things in common: integrity, goals, pioneering attitude, self-reliance, positive self-acceptance, balance in life, a sense of community, and the ability to transcend being a racial victim. Using the Internet, it is possible to exhibit these traits, and move beyond being a successful Black to being a successful PERSON.

In a world where color is measured in bits, not melanin, it is difficult to identify and classify minorities. A thought might be ignored by some, but not all, and can never be interrupted by a more powerful person attempting to flex their authority.

Steven Carter (*Reflections Of An Affirmative Action Baby*), who complains bitterly about feeling like a token with perceived inferior skills, should be thrilled at the opportunity the Internet offers. Finally, a place where he can use his huge words and pontificate, without letting on that he is any particular race. He might get flamed (caustic responses). Those who respond would have no way of knowing his race.

Studs Terkel, who is familiar with the raceless ambiguity that radio provides, probably already scans the network, reading news groups like soc.sci.intercultural, or, being the big fan of Chicago that he is, rec.chi.cult. He definitely would plug into rec.chi.radio! These are all news groups on the Internet. The groups are sometimes tiny, like the radio news group, which never has more than five or six messages. The comments are there, however, for everyone to see, and are as legitimate as the comments posted in comp.society.cu-digest.

The Internet is not Nirvana. It has problems that might choke it into a less effective resource. Foremost among those problems is abuse of the system by people who are trying to push the system from an information resource to a commercial resource. The idea of sharing ideas is fine, and many of those ideas translate to business later, but if the Internet gets clogged with junk mail, it will cease to be simple and useful.

There are also those who want to restrict access to the Internet, either through censorship, or by considering charging a lot more money for the service. Currently (except for Prodigy users), any message can be posted to a group. This includes messages from the less-savory (in my opinion) elements of society: hate mongers, pornography distributors, pedaphiles, and chain-letter propagators. The Constitution guarantees them a voice, and if that voice is restricted tomorrow, the next group to be restricted could be those who write to support, say, equity in the workplace. It could happen.

The restrictions caused by hiking up the price of gaining an account is another insidious idea. The people who use the Internet for free up until recently are those who have privilege--computer programmers, university professionals, or corporate engineers. Most are white males. The huge influx of new users include those whose circumstances never allowed them to have a voice before. Often, their voice is all they have. Placing a fee on using the Internet now would be like early American laws allowing only property owners to vote. Instead of cutting off the people who want to speak, the Internet gurus should figure out how to make the system work for a larger and expanding group of users.

Until these problems are solved, the future of the Internet is uncertain. This makes it that much more important to begin

scanning the network, posting messages, and engaging in the various debates online.

I read eight books and four online publications during this semester. The books taught me about the past and the present, outlining the path to success and the problems along that path. The zines showed me the future; just locating them exposed me to hundreds of sources of opinion and information. If I learned anything this semester, it was that I should consider the traits outlined in *Children Of The Dream* continue to pursue information on the Internet, broaden my knowledge of internetworked operations, and use that knowledge to establish a successful career.