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Liberating Voices! A Pattern Language for Communication Revolution

25 Cyberpower

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In the age of the Internet, if someone can't send an email or browse the web, they are much like the person in the age of print who had to sign their name with an X. Many people and communities are still catching up to the information age and what digital tools offer. One word for what they offer is Cyberpower—power in cyberspace.

The usefulness of this word can be understood in comparison to another useful word: e-commerce. E-commerce is a word that summed up what businesses, coders and consumers were doing. On the basis of that summation, many more people were guided in that direction, and e-commerce became more advanced as a result. Millions are now buying and selling online, with the goods delivered in the real world. Our experience with the word cyberpower is the much same: the word came into use based on practice; then it mobilized more people to exercise their cyberpower. As with e-commerce, when you wield cyberpower, the “goods”—power—are delivered in the real world, in a cycle from actual to virtual to actual.

Context: Digital inequality often impacts the same people as older inequalities such as poverty, oppression, discrimination, exclusion. But the new tools are so powerful that not using them sets individuals, groups and communities even further back. The hardware and software are still changing, and only the users are able to shape them and shape the future. And a global conversation is taking place every day online. They're talking about

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you—but can you answer back? If not, cyberpower is what you need.

Discussion. Even as technology changes, diffuses, and becomes cheaper, digital inequalities persist. For certain populations, access is impossible or is controlled, skills are lower, support isn't there, or the tools and resources themselves are relatively irrelevant. If the core conversations and the rich information sources are all online, yet not everyone is participating or even able to observe, how do we maintain democracy? Recent calls for a dialogue of civilizations, starting with the United Nations (1998), rather than a clash of civilizations (Huntington 1998) could be taking part online, but only if everyone can see, hear, and speak in cyberspace.

It is not yet well understood, but communities in crisis—be it from poverty, disaster, war or some other adversity—are known to turn to technology for response and recovery. Cellphones, impromptu cybercafés, the Internet, all helped in the Gulf hurricane recovery. Farmers on quarantined farms quickly mastered home Internet use during England's foot-and-mouth-disease outbreak. The US armed forces now strategize in terms of land, sea, air, and cyberspace. Immigrants all over the world have created digital diasporas. (Miller and Slater 2000) Whatever language people use to describe it, cyberpower is the driver in all these cases.

Hiphop can be seen as a technology-based response to crisis and a cyberpower project. In a community-based seminar, we proposed to create a CD of original raps about IT. Students and community members were skeptical—one said, "We don't know anything about computers"—but all the music making was digital, the tools were put together in bedrooms and basements, and the result was a compilation of 15 tracks. Sample these lyrics by S. Supreme:

Information technology

Skipping the Black community with no apology

Flipping the power off

On an already alarming deficit,

So please, please, PLEASE, PASS THE MESSAGE KID!

Ohh Umm Diddy Dum Dum

If he don't turn his Ice off

And turn his head past the gas of Microsoft

He'll really be lost like the tribe, 'cause the time is now and that's a bet

How you throwing up a set and you ain't on the Net,

Yet you say you're a G?

I said I'm not Chuck D, but welcome to the terror

If you ain't ready to build in this information era

Survival of the fittest, our rights get diminished, cats be on their Crickets

But don't know about Linux

In this track cyberpower is talking about cyberpower.

Another example of cyberpower is our experience with an auction of Malcolm X's papers. The sale, planned for March 2002, was discovered online, then thousands protested online and the sale was stopped. The process began when monitoring eBay for items related to Malcolm X, we discovered that eBay's auction house, Butterfields, was about to sell thousands of pages of Malcolm's diaries and notes, recovered from a storage locker, for an expected price of \$500,000. Using the listserv H-Afro-Am, this news was spread across multiple communities of scholars, librarians, activists, and others. The American Library Association then created a story on their online news site which is fed to more sites and individuals. The next day The New York Times did a story. On the third day The Guardian newspaper ran a story about the impending sale and the online groundswell against it. The listservs and the news articles alerted the family and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, who were able to negotiate the postponing of the sale, then its cancellation. An agreement was negotiated with the seller whereby the materials are now in the possession of the family, housed at the Schomburg's archives. In sum, the important historical papers (actual) were being auctioned (virtual); thousands of people were mobilized (virtual); traditional media carried the story (virtual and actual); and ultimately the materials were withdrawn from sale and

placed intact in a public library archive for scholars and the public (actual).

Another example of cyberpower is told by Mele (1999). Faced with a teardown of their housing project, tenants in Wilmington, North Carolina wrangled the key to a long-locked community room, internet access for the lone computer (actual), and via email and listservs (virtual) recruited architects and planners to help them obtain, digest and answer developer and city plans. They won an actual seat at the negotiating table and, more important, key changes to the teardown plan that included interim and long-term housing for residents.

All sorts of new tools for exercising cyberpower are in wide usage at this writing, for example, MySpace, blogs, wikis, and the online video festival known as YouTube. Use of any of these tools locates you in a lively community. The idea from Putnam (2000) that we're "bowling alone," not connecting with other people in an atomized world, is, as Lin (2001) asserted, trumped by the fact that we are not computing alone.

Solution. Cyberpower means two related activities related to empowerment: 1) individuals, groups and organizations using digital tools for their own goals, or 2) using digital tools as part of community organizing. The general idea is that people can use cyberpower in virtual space to get power in the actual space. Cyberorganizers help get people cyberpower just as community organizers help get communities empowered.

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