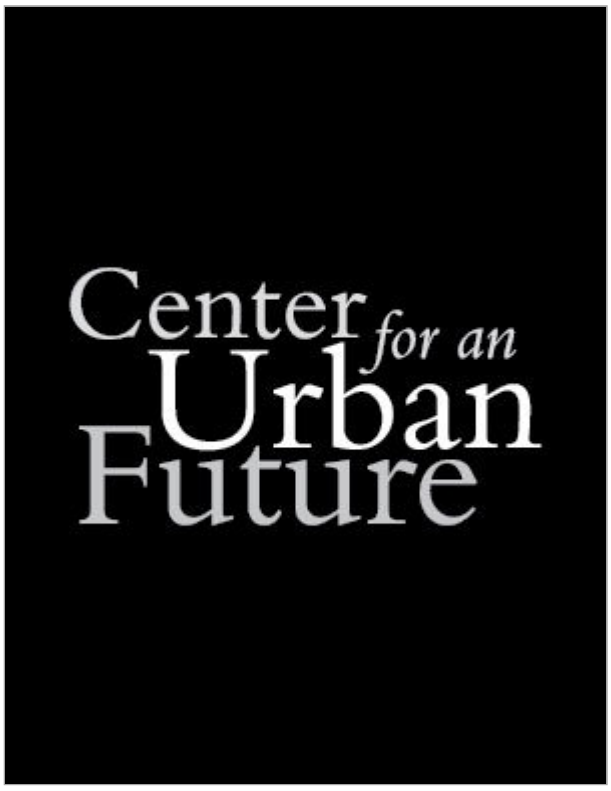



Commentary/Op-Ed - January 2004

# Safety ‘Net

New York City is increasingly wired to help poor residents access city services and search for jobs online--but the gap between potential and practice could comprise a second Digital Divide.

by Tom Kamber

Forget the divide. Let's start conquering.

Yes, inequitable access to technology is a continuing problem in America. Nonetheless, huge numbers of poor people join the Digital Age every year. Conservative estimates suggest that 10 to 20 percent of poor households are already regular internet users. In New York City alone, this translates into 100,000 or more low-income people who can be reached through the internet, and these numbers are growing rapidly. So the "digital divide" is narrowing every day.

More frustrating than the continued existence of the digital divide is the degree to which policymakers and activists have focused on that single problem, missing opportunities to use the technology, right now, to help people overcome the challenges of poverty. Getting lost in all the concern about low-income people who need computers are the needs of those who are already online.

Access to the internet means much more to the poor than connecting more easily to news, shopping and games--it offerslow-income people a rare opportunity to overcome the geographic and social isolation that reinforce the effects of poverty in most urban communities.

Can't find a job in the neighborhood? Online classifieds allow you to search job listings citywide and by keyword. No one you know can tell you how to get health insurance for your child? There are excellent websites that explain Child Health Plus and describe how to sign up. Can't find an affordable apartment? A website in Portland, Oregon, allows poor people to search citywide for subsidized units without having to visit dozens of different affordable-housing providers separately.

It doesn't take much imagination to envision how the web might transform the experience of poor Americans in some very

profound ways. From a government-service-delivery perspective, it's a channel you could drive a tanker through.

Unfortunately, instead of providing a boat-load of online services and programs for the poor, New York City is stuck in a watch-and-wait mode. While cities like Seattle and Portland are at the forefront of providing access to child care, housing and health resources online, New York offers relatively few opportunities for low-income residents to complete transactions or do much of anything via the web. In fact, as our public websites have become more established over the past few years, several disturbing trends are emerging.

The first is what I call "digital franking." Franking refers to the longstanding practice of politicians making free use of government mailroom and printing resources to send newsletters to their constituents. Franking has long played a central role in helping public officials project positive images to voters. Practiced through the mail, it's a periodic form of low-level political chicanery that helps stack the deck in favor of incumbents. But with the advent of the internet, voters who use government websites can be subjected to positive news about their public servants 24 hours a day. A quick visit to the homepage of your favorite public official or city agency will confirm this. Virtually all the prominent information on display is designed to present a politician in the most favorable light--not to provide the services most people are looking for when they log on.

The city's flagship site at NYC.gov is a perfect example. When I logged on for a random test-surf one day this past fall, I was first confronted with an 18-kilobyte photo of the mayor in mid-grin, which took up close to a quarter of the page. "Mayor Bloomberg and Yarrow LLC Break Ground for $47 Million Historic Redevelopment in Lower Manhattan," read the headline. Just in case you missed the point, the top frame of the left-hand column on the page, headed "Office of the Mayor," invited you to access a photo gallery and biography of Mayor Bloomberg, and to read more press releases.

Digital franking at your service.

Unfortunately, digital franking is much more destructive than its offline ancestor. The problem with using NYC.gov as a public-relations outlet for the mayor's re-election campaign is not just that it unfairly disadvantages his electoral opponents. It's that the p.r. elements of the site keep visitors from doing or seeing what they came for. It's as if Amazon.com were to clot up its main consumer page with press releases about its stock value. Even more disturbing is the biased impact of the practice; low-literacy visitors to these sites are much less likely to wade through irrelevant and unhelpful material in order to find what they are looking for. It's not just an inconvenience--it's a genuine barrier to service.

The problem is by no means limited to sites run by the mayor. On the same test run, Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum's website offered a great guide to city government, but presented it with no more fanfare than her account of her recent trip to Israel. The borough presidents' and comptroller's sites were made from the same mold. In fact, virtually every public official or agency site in the city focuses more on public relations than on connecting people to information or services.

The second problem might be called "armchair design," since it is rooted in our tendency to create major public web properties with little or no research in poor communities. Why is this important? Because studies suggest that poor people have substantially different patterns of internet use, different obstacles to overcome, and different priorities for online content than their wealthier counterparts. And it helps to know what those differences are if government websites are going to successfully provide services to those who need them.

For example, low-income users have special challenges due to lower levels of literacy and computer experience, but these barriers can usually be overcome with proper planning and design. Nonprofit groups such as the Children's Partnership, Computers for Youth and One Economy Corporation are among the very few who have conducted user testing with low-income people, and they have learned a great deal about what works for poor people online. Children's Partnership has published several reports focusing on how to provide content in ways that maximize the value for low-income users. Top recommendations include using plain language, providing Spanish translation and simplifying the way content is presented.

Unfortunately, no government agency in New York City has conducted any systematic research targeted at low-income

users, and the results are obvious. Virtually no public sites in New York are bilingual or multi-lingual, nor do they employ a plain-language approach meant to ease use for limited-literacy users. Information is presented in a text-heavy manner, laden with jargon and acronyms. Ease of use rarely seems to have animated the design teams. Guidelines such as those issued by Children's Partnership are left on the shelf. It's hard to gauge the consequences for low-income users of these sites, but it's clear we're not putting much effort into meeting their needs.

Poor people also tend to visit different sites on the internet than do people in higher-income brackets. While those in thelatter category spend a lot of time shopping online and getting cheap air tickets, studies consistently show that low-income users focus their attention disproportionately on career sites. My last employer, One Economy Corporation, runs a website for low-income people (www.BeehiveNYC.org), and their user data shows that when people come to the homepage, one of the first things they do is click on the "Jobs" button.

The good news is this means that tens of thousands of the low-income people who have internet access are already trying to connect to resources they need. Even better, there are fantastic resources available online through federal career-planning sites such as O*NET. Other online career sites provide robust searching opportunities. What a great opportunity for presenting coherent workforce-development and job-searching materials to a huge group at a low cost!

The bad news? New York City's online workforce-development materials are the digital equivalent of a tangled mess of yarn. Until recently, the flagship site was called "Workforce 1," but now this is buried in a sidebar one click off the NYC.gov homepage. When I clicked on the link for "City of New York Job Opportunities" from here, I landed on a page headed by an article about bringing the Olympics to New York City in 2012. Clicking on the same link off the NYC.gov page brings one to a page with a hodgepodge of jobs links. If you have the misfortune of clicking the link promising "course listings offered by job training providers," you'll get to visit Acronym Hell, which turns out to be a page designed for the providers themselves--and which assures you that the "FEIN should be entered on this system as 111-22-3456."

This face of government is one with which low-income people are all too familiar. It has been seen for decades in the dreary offices, long lines, impatient clerks and confusing paperwork they have come to accept as part of the standard operating procedure for getting various forms of public assistance.

There is no reason this face has to be the face of the future, if we recognize the moment for what it is--a chance to revolutionize the way we deliver services in the city.

Just a few simple steps could take us off the road to re-creating business-as-usual in digital form, and put us on our way toward making the internet a genuine tool for delivering services and alleviating poverty.

First, we have to put an end to digital franking. Public websites should be treated like digital offices where people come for help, not scrolling media for presenting press releases, politician bios, and photo-ops. We should separate out the public relations and press functions from public-agency and elected-official websites, place them on an "About Us" page and link to that page--demurely--from the public sites. With all the space we save, we can build sites that actually serve their users. For example, after 9/11, Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff's office created a great website at LowerManhattan.info that presents a wide range of helpful information about Lower Manhattan in a logical and user-friendly format. It is a great model for other agencies.

Second, let's set aside 2 percent of the cost of building public websites for user research in low-income communities. We need to know more about the overall kinds of information poor people want to access online, as well as their priorities within various content areas. Without it, we have no idea what issues and information to place high on the sites and what should be buried or left off. We also need to test our user interfaces with poor people. Testing how low-income people react to graphics, presentation and copy tone, and how they navigate a site can provide critical discipline to web development teams that too often overload pages with too much text, confusing graphics and unfriendly user features.

Finally, we need to adopt a laser-like focus on jobs. Sure, poor people need lots of help in various areas, but it's pretty clear that workforce and employment concerns cut across an extraordinary range of issues that are important to low-income computer users. From a public-policy standpoint, zeroing in on jobs is a preferred strategy because it allows us to solve one problem that can bring a cascading progression of improvements in the lives of the people we are trying to help.

The technology at hand offers us a chance to reenvision and reorganize the way government interacts with people. This change is already taking place in the corporate world as more and more businesses begin to use the internet as a tool to deliver what customers want in the way that they want it. New York must resist the impulse to use new technology simply to reinforce the same old patterns.

If we don't, we'll just trade wasting time in line for wasting time online.

---

CENTER FOR AN URBAN FUTURE
120 Wall Street, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10005

cuf@nycfuture.org © All Rights Reserved.