

Talk at INFO 2002 by Kate Williams

I am here to talk about social cyberpower – ciberpoder social. 8 others are here too. Please, stand up, spiders. Let everyone see you.

We are the Toledo Spiders. We weave webs. The whole idea is: When spiders unite, they can tie up lions. Cuando las arañas se juntan, inmovilizan leones.

Yesterday we took this slogan to the Palacio de Computacion over by the Capitolio and they told us they would be the Havana Spiders. That's really great.

This month three of us completed masters' theses in Africana Studies at the University of Toledo. My comments are based on these three and on other action-research reports we have done. All this and these images and more (including even Fidel Castro) are on a little CD at our table in the IDICT booth today, so check with us there.

OK – Cyberpower means: does a person have any power in cyberspace? What can they do there? What do they do there? There are three kinds of cyberpower and I will talk about each.

1) individual cyberpower

2) social cyberpower

3) ideological cyberpower

But wait. We cannot live in cyberspace. We eat, sleep, breathe in physical space. So to start, cyberpower depends on a base of operations. For us it is a telecenter, the Murchison Community Center.

Here starts number one, individual cyberpower. The Murchison Center was founded by a small church in the African American community. The social capital of the black church, which built the US freedom (and produced Martin Luther King), bonding (within-community) social capital, is the center's main resource. With that energy, the center has assembled volunteers and almost-new computers and networking and a tiny budget (between zero and \$30,000 each year). The center offers classes, a bit like the Palacio – helping individuals use computers and the Internet, to exercise power in cyberspace. For instance a guy living down the block teaches families how to assemble a computer, how to upgrade and repair them. Teaching kids to build web pages so that a young gardener or a young rap fan, can be found in cyberspace. (We do gardening too, please visit our table for that.)

Two. Social cyberpower. The idea here is that groups and community institutions need power in cyberspace, power over cyberspace. This project is to upload the popular culture of everyday life.

Upload means: move your information and ideas up from your computer to a server on the Net. Popular culture of everyday life means: what is it that people do everyday that is their culture and no one else's. Not the government's doings, not the corporations doings made to look like popular culture, but really theirs. We all need to be uploaders rather than just downloaders.

Let me explain the social cyberpower sites. There are four.

Cyberchurch – web sites for the most numerous and important institutions in the Black community, the churches. Helping the minister and the congregation use the web to share church history, announcements, sermons, audio files of the choir, as well as starting to use email and listservs for cyberministry.

Cyberschools – web sites for the public schools, the school activities, the struggling parent organizations. Helping prepare kids for statewide math tests that 90% have been failing to a point where they have been unable to graduate. Putting practice tests online so kids can print them and practice them at a library computer or at the Murchison Center.

Cyberfamily – web sites for family trees, for genealogy. Family reunions are annual events. Cyberfamilies is a year round family reunion.

Cyberhair – a web site about Black People's Hair. Hair is sculpture, it is identity, it is protest, and it is a daily struggle. The site is a collection of combs giving the socioeconomics of comb design. There is a gallery of sounds and sights from an emotional campus conference on hair. And there is a database including 50 hair salons in the African American community, with hours of operation, styles they can do, location, map, photos, staff.

These websites have all caught the imagination of people in the community. In each case a team has built and maintains the site. This team has technical skills and community knowledge.

So the community's strength is represented in cyberspace. Social cyberpower: improved knowledge, social connections, a community strengthened by means of a new territory (cyberspace) that it is conquering. Or perhaps liberating.

Third. Ideological cyberpower. Uploading our voices in political debate. "Lift every voice and sing" was the anthem in the 1920s. Now we need every voice to generate and share knowledge. These sites include:

Reparations. A 2002 conference on reparations for slavery. Audio of the discussions. References to other commentary.

911. A set of September 2001 panels which were held in various cities, on campus and off, asking "War or peace?" What did Northamericans think when they turned off their TVs and began to ask this question? It was a moving and surprising answer.

Malcolm X. A re-creation of a 1990 conference held in Havana, at Casa de las Americas. "Malcolm X in Cuba." Audio of all presentations (by Cubans and Northamericans) and what I promised you. A video of Fidel when he met with a conference group.

So – yesterday at the Palacio we saw 2, 3, 4 kids working together on one computer. This is our model for social cyberpower. Two, 3, many people. A fifty person church congregation. A multigenerational family. A school. Hair stylists across the barrio. Each, now, with an added dimension to their lives, using cyberpower to change cyberspace and, through that, to change the world.

We are at the beginning. We are now putting computers in hair salons. We have established one listserv at the Murchison Center and one grandmother used it to organize a community barbecue. From individual to social cyberpower, with a good measure of ideological cyberpower.

From the actual world to the virtual one (cyberspace). The virtual world then impacts the actual world.

This is the experience of the Toledo Spiders. Thank you.