

SEPTEMBER 20

The hollow promise of digital technology

This is the time of year when media campaigns for the latest digital products are apt to go into overdrive. Schools are back in session, and the holiday sales blitz is getting underway. For the latest computerized gizmos, that means an escalating media drive – revving up news coverage, PR hype and advertisements. Often it's hard to tell the difference between the three.

At the risk of sounding like a techno-scrooge, I take a dim view of media excitement about the very latest in digital gadgets. No doubt the new versions of laptops or handhelds offer many virtues. But umpteen gigabytes can never make up for a media culture and a political environment largely out of touch with human empathy.

The new mega-gig innovations are marketed as awesome pluses without downsides. But one big problem is that we're encouraged to believe in purchasing our way into solutions. Huge expectations for satisfaction from the multimedia Internet – and rampant enthusiasm for faster and more compact technologies with the latest dazzling features – routinely get us into thinking like consumers with the speed of a broadband download.

Rarely mentioned is the economic stratification that the digital wonderland both reflects and exacerbates. While computer prices have come down in recent years, the overall costs of partaking in the online world are another matter.

"Dial up" is passe and mostly excludes access to the video and sound that have become routine on the Internet. In contrast, broadband usually means higher fees. The same can be said about cable television. And while such expenses are incidental to some, they are prohibitive to others.

Many news sites and databases have gone from being entirely free to requiring payment for anything beyond limited access. The idea of cyberspace as "the information superhighway" is now quaint and antique in a world where, more than anything else, the Internet is about commerce.

A lot of people are making creative and civic use of the Internet, enlivening democratic possibilities in the process. But the fact remains that overall, for Americans, the most widely trafficked sources of news and commentary on the Web are often part of the same

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media conglomerates that own the biggest print, broadcast and cable outlets.

The quality of journalism and debate ultimately depends on content. And I'm not referring to "content" in the narrow sense of feeding words and images to the insatiable techno-media beast – with its superficially competitive Web sites and 24-hour cable news channels that simultaneously have no specific deadline and are always on deadline.

For more than 200 years, the arriving technologies have been hailed as wondrous new shortcuts to democracy. In the late 18th century, the first rudimentary telegraphs were supposed to usher in an egalitarian era of communications. During the last hundred years, outsized expectations for democratization and social change were projected onto radio – then broadcast television, cable TV, email and the Web -- and now podcasts, online video and various other permutations of digital deliverance.

But the realities of economic class and the leverage of concentrated capital cannot be swept aside – or even seriously disrupted – by any technology. Every gee-whiz digital breakthrough happens in a social and political context. And the tremendous gaps of power among Americans, in large measure corresponding to financial resources, will not be closed by digital means.

Though usually expressed in indirect ways, idolatry of affluence has been a common theme in mass media, paralleled by the adulation heaped on pricey consumer goods – most flagrant in advertisements but also noticeable in quite a lot of news coverage. The great enthusiasm that's expressed toward digital products often fits right into the common media reverence for what only money can buy.

Sometimes I get the feeling that the endless media chatter about the latest digital products – including the ponderous coverage of the market-share implications for media industries – is just another way of talking around the extreme imbalances of power that persist in the United States. Until we're able to bring such inequities into some semblance of democratic balance, no amount of bandwidth or digital efficiency can be very useful in creating a society that lives up to our best ideals.

*The paperback edition of Norman Solomon's latest book, **War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death**, was published this summer. For information, go to: www.warmadeeasy.com*