SEPTEMBER 18, 2003

The get-rich con: Are media values better now?

Presidential candidates have become fond of asking whether Americans are better off now than they were four years ago. Looking back at a sensational Time magazine story that appeared in late September 1999, we might want to ask a similar question: "Are media values better than they were four years ago?"

The enthralling title of Time's 20-page cover story — "GetRich.com" — heralded scenarios for wondrously swift elevation into the ranks of the wealthy. The spread had its share of wry digs and sardonic asides, but reverence for the magnitude of quick money in dotcomland seemed to dwarf any misgivings.

Although the magazine explained that "it's not all about the money," the punch line arrived a few dozen words later: "But mostly, it's the money." And back in 1999, there was plenty of it moving into new digital enterprises. "In the second quarter of this year, venture-capital funding in the U.S. increased 77 percent, to a record $7.6 billion. More than half went to Internet start-ups."

At the time, Silicon Valley executives were holding stocks and options valued at $112 billion — a few billion dollars more than the GDP of Portugal. Computer-literate job seekers were riding high: "Never before have the unemployed been so cocky. ... E-commerce niches are getting claimed so quickly that there might not be time for business school anymore." Said one Stanford grad who was enjoying the rush of launching his own dot-com firm: "It's all about the buzz. I can't explain it. It's like magic."

The "GetRich.com" story was part of long-running media themes. Fourteen months earlier, Time was euphorically insisting that "the real economy exists in the thousands — even tens of thousands — of sites that together with Yahoo are remaking the face of global commerce." The nation's largest-circulation newsmagazine saw general prosperity on the cyber-horizon: "The real promise of all this change is that it will enrich all of us, not just a bunch of kids in Silicon Valley."

While Time and other media outlets were simply reporting on the dot-com phenomenon, they were also hyping the phenom — glorifying it and egging it on. They did so repeatedly during the last few years of the 20th century.

That coverage makes for sad reading now. But, truly, it was just as sad then. The hollowness of monetary dreams is scarcely mitigated when they are being fulfilled. Half a century ago, sociologist C. Wright Mills warned of "a creeping indifference and a silent hollowing out." In the United States, he observed, "money is the one unambiguous criterion of success" — and behind the obvious fact that people "want money" lurked the more unsettling reality that "their very standards are pecuniary."

Such monetarily fixated standards are so widespread that they often permeate discussions of life and death. In mid-September, when Colin Powell strained to justify Washington's refusal to let go of the occupation of Iraq, he used the language of a venture capitalist: "Since the United States and its coalition partners have invested a great deal of political capital, as well as financial resources, as well as the lives of our men and women ... we can't be expected to suddenly just step aside."

The departed Internet boom may be the stuff of some fond memories, but its heyday came in a dubious economic context. The tech bounties were hardly being shared equitably. In a book titled "Economic Apartheid in America," authors Chuck Collins and Felice Yeskel pointed out: "Between 1977 and 1999, the average after-tax income of the wealthiest 1 percent of households went up 119.7 percent. The bottom fifth of households lost 12 percent and the middle fifth lost 3.1 percent."

Those kinds of enormous disparities rarely seem to trouble the journalists who avidly recount the ups and downs of big investors. The sensibilities that major media outlets bring to bear on economic reporting are not far afield from the goals that preoccupy the media moguls who are yearning to gain even greater market share and even more humongous profits.

"You can have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, or democracy," Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis commented. "But you cannot have both." This observation applies fully to the news media — the lifeblood of vitality for the body politic.

About 20 years ago, when cable TV arrived with great fanfare, the upbeat futurist Alvin Toffler foresaw the emergence of "a truly new era — the age of the de-massified media." In theory, the country would be cable-wired for democracy.

But today, as Americans can see by clicking through the corporate-dominated fare, the realities of economic power have implemented very different plans for cable television. In 2003, the cable picture is grim. On Sept. 15, a Wall Street Journal article noted in passing: "Of the top 25 cable channels, 20 are now owned by one of the big five media companies."

The likes of Viacom, Disney, News Corp. (which includes Fox), AOL Time Warner and General Electric continue to promote values similar to the ones that were implicit in countless news stories celebrating the dot-com boom. Fixations on getting rich are the propellants of profit-driven media conglomerates. When the subject is zeal to accumulate wealth, they'll be the last to focus on the downsides: for individuals and for democracy. ■

Norman Solomon is co-author (with Reese Erlich) of "Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You," published this year by Context Books.