Think Rubix

Digital Inequity and the Transformative Power of Culture

Equity Innovation Studio

White Paper

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Summary

The 21st century is defined by humanity's relationship with the digital world. The growing centrality of the internet, smartphones, and social media in every aspect of modern life has transformed our economy, politics, and social structures to both progressive and harmful ends, but for better or worse, the digital realm is here to stay. So, for all those interested in creating a more just and equitable society - both online and offline - understanding and unpacking how society shapes technology and vice versa is critical to mitigating its harms and leveraging digital tools for our collective good.

In this white paper, we explore digital inequity as one of the most prominent barriers to an equitable society in the modern day. We emphasize that technology is not separate from or superior to human thinking and biases; in reality, the digital landscape is just a reflection of the "real world," and is necessarily imbued with all the problems and flaws within it. We thus define digital inequity as the reproduction of the historical inequities already present in the offline world in technological products, relationships, and systems. We explore the roots of digital inequity, the key factors currently sustaining and perpetuating it, and highlight some of its biggest and most harmful impacts on marginalized communities.

If the digital realm is a mirror to the offline world, however, then we also know that its current inequity is not a fixed status. As the real world changes and evolves, so does its digital reflection. This dynamic nature opens the door for marginalized communities to wield and leverage the transformative power of culture - defined herein as the ability to change the conditions of the material and cultural world towards a different distribution of resources, a different collection of goals, and/or a different group of values - towards a more equitable vision of the digital landscape. Marginalized communities use their cultural power to challenge the dominant culture set by Silicon Valley, US government entities, and broader Western norms and in doing so, introduce alternative visions of what the digital realm can look like. We argue that this is a necessary and essential tool against digital inequity, and explain our approach to harnessing this transformative power by honoring and integrating subaltern cultures, chiefly Black culture.

02 Defining Digital Inequity

"Artificial Intelligence (AI) is based on data, and data is a reflection of our history, so the past dwells within our algorithms. This data is showing us the inequalities that have been here."

As humans increasingly utilize digital tools like computers, smartphones, and the internet in their personal and professional lives, we are rapidly constructing a new digital space that we collectively shape, share, and experience. This digital space is the defining feature of the 21st century and the crucible for a new economy and cultural frontier. It spans the gamut of social media, online learning, e-finance, commerce, mass communications, governance, and beyond - essentially, every aspect of the "real world" interacts with and is reflected in this digital space.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified our reliance on digital tools both in the workplace and in our social interactions, but in doing so, it has also laid bare the deep inequities that various marginalized communities face in their access to and experience of the digital space. These problems existed well before the pandemic, but the increasingly central role that digital tools play in shaping our lives makes addressing these inequities more urgent than ever before.

There's no shortage of stories in the US imagination that portray our fears about the consequences of the technology we create. Popular shows like *Black Mirror*, movies like The *Terminator*, and the ever-present status of George Orwell's novel *1984* in high school curricula depict dystopian societies brought about through technological advancement, betraying a collective cultural skepticism of artificial intelligence and other digital tools. But these media narratives too often place technology as the cause for the dystopia, rather than as a tool for powerful people to wield in order to create and control that dystopian society in the first place. In reality, professor and AI researcher Meredith Broussard asserts that "the concern is not what artificial intelligence will do to us, but what the powerful will do with the AI to us." Thus, re-centering power in our definition of digital inequity is essential to understanding how and why the digital realm produces such demonstrably inequitable access and experiences.

Digital inequity can best be described as the reproduction of the historical inequities already present in the offline world in technological products, relationships, and systems.

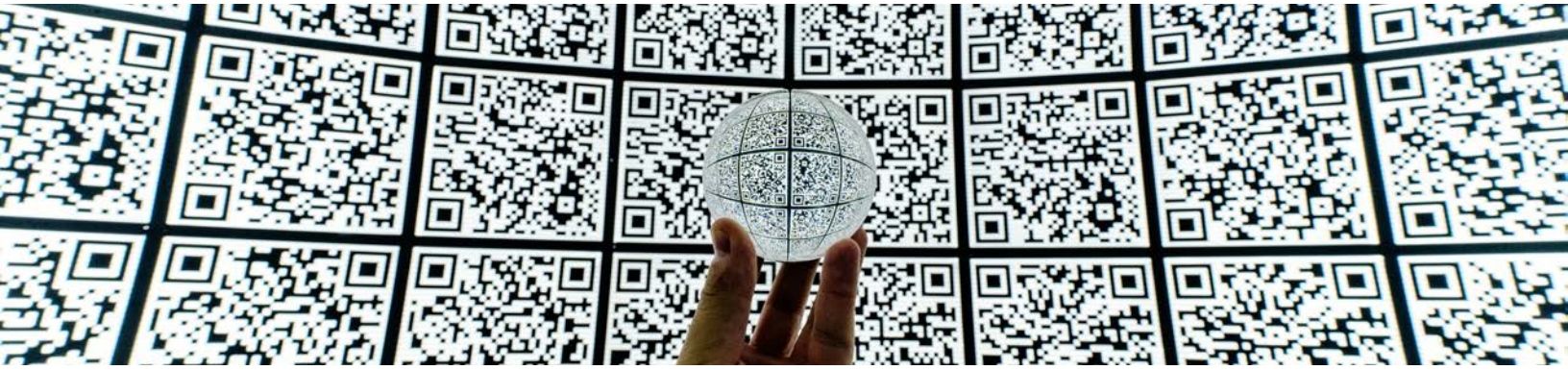

Photo by Mitya Ivanov on Unsplash

Those historical inequities include but are not limited to systems of racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, nationalism, cisgender supremacy, anti-LGBTQ prejudice, and ethnic biases - essentially, all forms of artificial social stratification designed and implemented to benefit a small, elite subset group by excluding others. The biases of developers, coders, and designers inform the products they produce, and in a field dominated by cisgender white men largely located in Sillicon Valley, the perspectives of marginalized identities are routinely shut out and ignored. The consequences of a small, homogenous group designing and controlling the vast majority of digital real estate naturally reproduces the same inequities seen in the offline world, which is largely politically, financially, and culturally dominated by that same small group.

The reality is that the digital realm, as a creation by and for humans, is merely a reflection of the world we're already living in. These dystopian elements are *everywhere*. For instance, facial recognition software that doesn't recognize darker faces, resume-scanning algorithms that automatically reject female applicants, 'weapons of math destruction' that corrupt university admissions and the job market, the erasure of anti-racist and anti-colonial voices, and the deprioritization of Black and brown creators on social media platforms, the unregulated manipulation of millions of ghost workers who support international algorithms without visibility, security, or support, and automated technologies that control, divide, and manipulate the most vulnerable people in our society - modeled after the poorhouses of old - are present in the digital space because they are present in the human space.

This relationship is a vicious cycle. The digital realm, an inherently biased creation of a small, homogenous group, provides fertile ground for biased narratives and user experiences to become entrenched in the minds of its users. The pre-existing prejudices of individuals who engage in these supremacist subcultures further shape the digital landscape towards inequity through trolling, digital organizing, and immense political pushback on even the smallest efforts to rein in and regulate online activity. The relative lack of comprehensive regulations to put guardrails on the ownership, and design, and manipulation of the digital realm is rapidly creating a parasitic relationship between the most harmful, biased elements of society and the digital landscape. Digital inequity has far-reaching implications for government entities, corporations, non-profits, and beyond.

Essentially, the social dystopia we fear is already here. The injustice pervading the offline world is a dystopia in and of itself, and the digital realm simply reflects this reality. Just as in the real world, however, injustice doesn't impact everyone equally, so its inequitable nature is both less visible and more normalized to the beneficiaries of white supremacy, patriarchy, ableism, and other tools of social stratification.

03 Digital Inequity in Context

"Today the glaring gap between egalitarian principles and inequitable practices is filled with subtler forms of discrimination that give the illusion of progress and neutrality, even as coded inequity makes it easier and faster to produce racist outcomes."

Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology*

Digital inequity is shaping how humans navigate and understand everyday life in both the online and offline world, and the reality is that this problem shows up in many contexts that touch upon nearly every aspect of modern life. Many of these contexts are already so pervasive and normalized that they are virtually invisible to society at large, and the sheer number of different contexts makes it impossible to list every single example in the scope of this paper. Still, highlighting significant contextual examples of digital inequity - and the origins of how they manifest in the first place - is key to understanding how this problem shapes every group and individual's experience of the digital realm.

First, it's important to explain how supremacist-coded design and narrative becomes so pervasive in the digital realm in the first place. We highlight five critical factors driving digital inequity as the following:

1. **First, that marginalized communities** disproportionately suffer from a lack of systemic access to digital technologies themselves, opportunities to learn how to design, interact with, and wield digital technologies, economic power to create alternatives to the digital tools that are rapidly becoming entrenched in daily life, and control over how to distribute resources in the digital landscape in an equitable manner.

Even when people on the margins can imagine how to wield digital tools for their own benefit, the nature of digital inequity often prevents them from being able to access the resources, skills, community, or ecosystem know-how to participate. Historically disadvantaged communities of every kind suffer from comparative inaccessibility of capital, educational resources, and personal and professional networks to enter the digital tech space in the first place, leading to abysmal representation in the tech and data industries - at over two-thirds of major tech companies, less than 5 percent of employees are Black. This systemic lack of access starts early and reflects the existing inequitable racial hierarchy. Across the country, 24 million people - mostly concentrated in rural areas - don't have access to high-speed broadband; but Black rural populations are particularly affected, with just 56 percent of majority Black rural areas receiving broadband compared to 75 percent of majority white areas.

Even when marginalized people are able to enter the tech industry, bias and prejudice runs rampant throughout every part of a field dominated by a small homogenous group - even when industry leaders roll out elaborate PR strategies to "prove" their commitment to diversity. This prevents underrepresented employees from feeling like their voices are being heard, valued, and taken into consideration in designing and deploying digital technologies.

But the impact of unequal systemic access to digital tools isn't just limited to tech jobs or education. The popularity of the digital realm has given rise to a content economy where individual creators can produce their own content, upload it to digital platforms, and sometimes split the profits of that content with the tech platform. Marginalized creators develop content that dominates and shapes much of the online discourse, but digital inequity prevents them from being compensated for their work.

One example is "Black Twitter", a term describing the highly active and interconnected collective of Black users on Twitter, which has frequently generated culture-dominating content. Black Twitter became a pillar of the racial justice movement, both online and offline, through its ability to amplify hashtags like #SayHerName and #BlackLivesMatter and rapidly spread awareness of incidents of police brutality and injustice, but individual organizers and users have become obscured in the political journalism around the issue. Outside social activism, Black creators on Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and other platforms produce a large body of work ranging from dances, memes, jokes, and other forms of content that shapes a large portion of online culture, but are routinely uncredited and uncompensated for their work. Even worse, white creators often plagiarize this content to great success, securing digital fame and financial deals off the backs of Black creators while denying their origins.

2. **Second, companies and governments** imbue artificial intelligence and other digital tools with a kind of "magical thinking" that the technology we create is necessarily superior to and able to overcome human biases and limitations.

On a community scale, digital inequity shapes how underserved communities are tested, and affected by digital artifacts. Though Western society tends to associate emerging technologies with newness, luxury, and innovation, the frequent reality is that seedier digital tools like facial recognition are tested on lower-income, marginalized populations before being marketed and sold to the upper elite in society. There are two main reasons for this: first, to further entrench and empower the prison industrial complex and its dehumanizing focus on Black and brown populations, and second, that disempowered groups like lower-income, underrepresented folks are less able to successfully mobilize against the use of these technologies in a socio-political system deliberately designed to ignore their voices and concerns. Even when affluent socialites invest in and deploy digital tools intending to help marginalized communities overcome systemic biases, the inherent problem of digital inequity in the design, ownership, and control of digital tools inevitably drives inequitable outcomes.

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By conflating digital capability with moral fiber, these technologies allow online communities to leverage its tools towards supremacist goals. Actors with malicious intentions like union-busting corporations or foreign governments can easily use AI to influence campaigns through a mix of misinformation and sending trolls to overwhelm online discourse to achieve their ends. For instance, It's relatively easier for white nationalist groups to find community, to spread racist messaging and visuals to a broad audience before some degree of government or corporate censorship steps in. A body of emerging research on the discursive impact of digital narratives supports the idea that supremacist-coded messaging tends to spread the farthest and have the deepest impact on the socio-political perspectives of humans exposed to them, to the exponential benefit of far-right groups and organizations.

Through algorithmic determinism, these users are both drawn deeper into the space and incentivized to leak these experiences into the offline world. The January 6th insurrection at the US Capitol is a prime example. What began as a digital campaign among various far-right communities online to rally support for the "Big Lie" that the 2020 election was stolen from former President Donald Trump swiftly became a real-world organizing effort to recruit individuals to travel to Washington D.C. on January 6th and storm the Capitol building to try and overturn the legal results of the election. Individuals within these communities and those exposed to the propaganda in this far-right reality bubble not only became convinced and deeply entrenched in the various conspiracy theories and white supremacist messaging inherent to this bubble, but also attempted to take their reality bubble offline and engaged in a violent attack to try and impose it on the entire country through a frighteningly near-successful coup.

This lack of awareness of technological limitation facilitates, at best, a tech environment that feels no need to pay special attention to how inequities manifest in digital tools and at worst, fertile ground for bad-intentioned actors to actively design a digital landscape that conforms to oppressive systems.

3. **Third, that Silicon Valley and its dominance over the design and control of the digital landscape** operates in a "shroud of secrecy" and lack of government regulations that essentially bars any wronged individual or group from opportunities for redress and shields the powerful from accountability.

On a broad scale, supremacist systems over the last couple decades have been successfully generating more international power to further marginalize, demonize, and destroy non-white cultures in the digital landscape. Take, for example, the World Trade Organization's regulations on intellectual property rights that serve to formalize and internationalize US IP rights to the detriment of Global South countries.

Data rights are a hot topic in the current national political debate largely because they are virtually nonexistent, particularly in the US. In the absence of government regulations, companies can harvest countless different types of data, from where you eat, sleep, travel, work, spend money, and more to turn the digital landscape into a dragnet for mass surveillance and a virtual mall for consumption. Companies like Facebook and Google have famously come under fire for the amount of data they take from their users and sell to different entities for profit with little to no communication to the users themselves about how their data is being used. This data is often used to further real-world inequity; the Silicon Valley data-mining corporation Palantir is an egregious example of how data is scraped to aid law enforcement, surveillance and military agencies to spy on over-policed communities. Without government regulations, however, individuals have no legal mechanism to reclaim ownership of their data.

The most recent and impactful consequence of this imbalanced power dynamic has been the uneven distribution of vaccine technology among countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks in large part to US-based corporations wielding WTO regulations to their own profit-based benefit instead of on behalf of the global good. Poorer, majority non-white countries have been left to fend for themselves in inventing and distributing vaccine to their own populations purely because of the greed of a few powerful corporations and the international legal structure that props them up. This painfully illustrates how digital inequity can and does have large-scale lethal consequences on vulnerable populations all over the world.

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4. Fourth, the experience we already navigate in the digital landscape is **driven by manipulation and disempowerment, instead of agency.**

For instance, dark patterns - psychological tricks designed to drive users towards a specific intended outcome by giving them the illusion of choice. These constructions work by obscuring other possibilities available to users like opting out of the experience, choosing alternatives, or going to the relevant government body and demanding digital regulations to stop the entity at hand from exerting near-monopolistic control over digital experiences.

Digital resources have rarely been designed with healthy psychological outcomes in mind. News feeds have been modeled after slot machines built for instant gratification, microtransactions offer the simplest ways to instantly spend currency, and the apathetic and caustic opinions of digital strangers affect our products and services. In essence, the systemic design and manipulation of the digital community robs us of our life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Marginalized communities are already fighting an uphill battle to be seen, credited, accepted, and engage equitably in the digital realm before they even log on. These factors impact our experience of digital inequity at every level, from the micro (individual, organization) to the macro (collective, society-wide).

Inequities that show up in the digital realm vis a vis the "real" world also generally spread biased messaging and narratives further than unbiased messaging and do so faster than in real-life interpersonal interactions, imbuing these tools with a dangerous power to amplify and entrench "reality bubbles" that conform to pre-existing biases in the offline world. These reality bubbles are intentional; often, corporate and political actors have a vested interest in spreading and entrenching prejudiced narratives to maintain their grip on power. They can and do achieve that by manipulating the user experience towards their preferred construction of reality.

5. Fifth, that the inequitable distribution of ownership and power over digital tools and benefits **further concentrates economic and social control in the hands of an elite few.**

Digital tools have completely transformed our economy, from the way we do business to the types of jobs available in the labor market. But the asymmetrical ownership and power over these digital tools reinforces the inequitable accumulation of wealth and economic prowess at the very top of society, both nationally and internationally - a trend that was building well before the introduction of the internet but has been growing exponentially ever since. As wealth and income inequality grows, so too does digital inequity, because groups without capital to create their own digital ecosystem, without an investment stake in the corporations who do exert the most control, or legal rights to the content they produce and share online are essentially barred from profiting off the fruits of their labor in the digital economy. The economic implications of this gap are enormous and multi-fold.

Nationally, this inequity is visible in things like the gig economy, where popular apps have disrupted traditional service work like deliveries, taxi services, retail, and more. The gig economy has shifted the nature of work by severing the traditional relationship between employer and employee, using technology as an intermediary and attempting to classify workers as independent contractors merely using their product to earn money from a series of separate "gigs." This serves as a thin excuse to generate higher profits for those who own and control these technologies - and their already wealthy investors - by cutting wages and benefits from workers. On average, gig economy workers earn 58 percent less than full-time employees, and more than half of gig workers have no benefits. The small, homogenous group with ownership and power over these digital tools is fundamentally changing the labor market in the US, and the relative lack of regulations around digital technology combines with sharp wealth and income inequality to prevent workers from being able to fight back. More than a full third of US workers - roughly 59 million people - are now working in the gig economy, underscoring how rapid and far-reaching the economic consequences of this unequal distribution of power.

Internationally, the topic of information and communication technologies for development has been a point of concern for years in the international development space. In 2020, 3.8 billion people are connected to the internet; however, rural populations are 37% less likely than urban populations and women are 20% less likely than men to use mobile internet. Additionally, the digital economy is deeply exclusive: The United States and China account for 90% of the market capitalization value of the world's 70 largest digital platforms, while Europe's share is 4% and Africa and Latin America's together is only 1%. Without demonstrable change in business systems that build value through the generation and manipulation of data, critical issues such as data security, consumer data rights and agency, and intelligent data use will remain in the hands of these small collections of immensely powerful technology providers.

Of course, the digital realm isn't a space that holds no agency for those on the margins: they have long been early adopters of emerging technologies for many purposes. They successfully use them to create and strengthen their own communities, to call attention to injustice, to organize social activism efforts, and to create and spread joy. All of these things are necessary and important, not only because they push back against both offline and online inequity, but because they show us the way out of digital inequity altogether.

It's tempting to envision a world where we collectively decide that enough is enough when it comes to Silicon Valley's creeping dominance over our everyday lives and disengage entirely. The truth, however, is that many digital technologies are here to stay. What we need, then, is a thorough reimagining of our digital landscape towards a new vision of justice, equity, and a balance of power and accountability in regards to the design, control, and accessibility of the digital realm. Underrepresented communities are already showing us the way towards that goal by leveraging the power of their voices, stories, and collective power through their own cultures, a topic we delve further into in the following section.

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04 The Transformative Power of Culture

"Blackness—in the guise of Black digital practice—opens the "black box" of the digital to show that all along, culture has warranted information and communication technology use."

Andre Brock Jr., *Distributed Blackness*

Clearly, marginalized communities - and all those interested in advocating for them - face an uphill battle when it comes to creating an inclusive digital space that truly serves all. The good news is that if bias-informed design is the major driving force behind digital inequity, then smarter, more equity-centered design is the solution. That requires **leveraging the transformative power of culture.**

But what do we mean by that? First, we have to start with a definition of culture. Culture is a broad term that can be loosely understood as the invisible, yet most fully formed, manifestation of the collective human condition. More specifically, Wyer, Chiu, and Hong define culture as

"networks of knowledge, consisting of learned routines of thinking, feeling, and interacting with other people, as well as a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world."

They emphasize that culture is inherently dynamic and exists at countless different levels, from national, ethnic, religious, minority population, local community, and many more, that all interact with and shape each other while also holding core tenets that keep sub-cultural groups together. Essentially, many different types of culture can and do exist within societies, and individuals can and do hold space in multiple cultures at the same time. This variance makes hammering down one society-wide definition of culture impossible, because it is an amalgam of many different cultures that are inherently changing all the time.

Still, there are some non-negotiable elements of culture that we can use in order to understand and leverage it on a national scale. Ying-yi Hong elaborates on these unique elements, which we use here as a baseline for this understanding:

A. Culture is shared (albeit incompletely) among a collection of interconnected individuals, who are often demarcated by race, ethnicity, or nationality;

B. Externalized by rich symbols, artifacts, social constructions, and social institutions (e.g., cultural icons, advertisements, and news media);

C. Used to form the common ground for communication among members;

D. Transmitted from one generation to the next or from old members to new members; and

E. Undergoing continuous modifications as aspects of the knowledge tradition may be falsified or deemed not applicable by newer social order and reality.

In essence, culture is shaped and experienced by collectives of people - the interactions we have, the stories we tell, the traditions we honor, the knowledge we impart, and the societies we build. In the digital world, different types of culture are embedded in our digital tools and landscape. While the real-world cultural dominance of a small, homogenous group of people plays a major role in determining the digital space, there are actually thousands of different cultures involved in interacting with and co-shaping the digital realm just as they do in the real world. Each of these cultures hold a power, as in, the ability to influence others - people, governments, communities, institutions, towards a particular end.

If offline culture is inherently dynamic, so too is digital culture. We define transformative power as the ability to change the conditions of the material and cultural world towards a different distribution of resources, a different collection of goals, and/or a different group of values. Individuals, communities, organizations, companies, and governments all hold transformative power to varying degrees. Additionally, people change, society changes, and the cultures we co-create and experience every day change along with them, constantly redistributing power in some amount all the time.

The question, then, is not who holds power, but **how transformative power can and should be wielded.**

Thus far, Western government and corporate leaders - those at the top of the social hierarchy - have shown little interest in making substantive, equity-centered transformative change on their own as beneficiaries of the unequal status quo, and rather do so in response to various kinds of public pressure from mass movements (ie direct actions, discursive effect on national political narratives, strikes, etc). Absent comprehensive regulations and legal accountability mechanisms for how these entities wield digital tools, movements - and the culture that they encompass and create - step in as the main checks on power in the digital realm.

In the digital realm, people of color from distressed communities impart onto and shape their culture within the digital landscape, integrating real-world culture with a unique cyberculture developed online. For Black communities specifically, Andre Brock Jr. defines the digital practices of creating Black spaces and decentering whiteness as the default internet identity as "Black cyberculture." Black cyberculture is in part overlapping but also distinct from Black culture as a whole in that it "interrogates an ontological perspective of what Blackness means for technology use and occasionally, design."

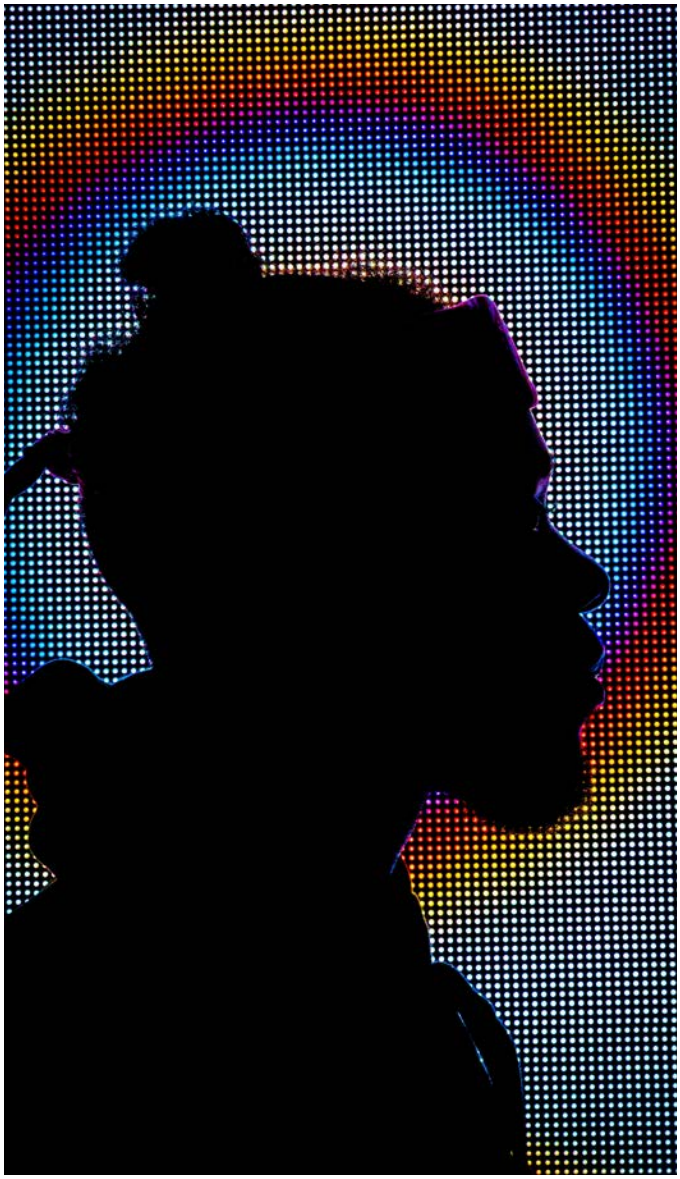

Photo by Drew Graham on Unsplash

For example, Black Twitter rose as an organic community because of pre-existing in-group communication practices of Black culture designed to be separate and semi-sheltered from white supremacy. At the same time, however, Black Twitter became an internet phenomenon through the observation of out-group observers, as it visibilized Black culture to non-Black users and sparked a conversation about how that visibilized Blackness shapes the collective experience of Twitter to participants and observers alike. Black cyberculture challenges the normalization of an unnamed, ungendered but undeniably white culture as the baseline identity for user experiences in the digital realm, and holds immense transformative power as it increasingly enters the mainstream of internet culture. Understanding these power shifts is the art that guides how we shift the world towards equity.

Harnessing the Transformative Power of Culture.
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Harnessing the transformative power of culture, then, can best be understood as the act of understanding and leveraging the changemaking potential of subaltern cultures towards an equity-based, inclusive environment for all. To do so, we must ask guiding questions about how we understand and wield culture:

- What does culture look like in your world? Your community? Your household? Your digital space? Your work? Your playspaces?

- What are your culture's boundaries? What are your culture's benefits? What's different about your culture from others, and what's the same?

- How does culture change, adapt, and evolve? What is constant, and unchanging about a culture?

- What does a culture do to its people? How can those people be moved?

- How do powerful digital actors rob you of your agency? What tools can you use to get agency back?

- How can cultural artifacts be used to shift public opinion?

- How do we use collective power to pressure - and change - powerful actors with ethics of domination?

05 Harnessing the Transformative Power of Culture in Practice

"The most important step in dismantling the digital poorhouse is changing how we think, talk, and feel about poverty. As counterintuitive as it may sound, the best cure for the misuse of big data is telling better stories."

Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality*

If digital inequity is a barrier we all inherently face when engaging in every aspect of the digital space, but culture holds a transformative power to push back against that inequity, then our question becomes how to harness that transformative power to fight for justice and equity both offline and online. Different organizations and groups of people will have different approaches, and we do not claim to hold all the answers. However, this section explains three non-negotiable elements that must be present in the process, and to highlight the specifics of Think Rubix's framework.

What are non-negotiable Elements of wielding the transformative power of culture?

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1. We cannot solve the problem of "reality bubbles" online if we don't acknowledge how systems of supremacy have generated an incomplete reality offline.

Before deciding on a future, people must tell the truth about the past. One of Western Society's first sins was to construct a 'terra nullius', an ethics of erasing entire civilizations for Western exploitation. Well before the existence of the digital landscape, millions of people refuse to confront truths of white supremacy, cisgender supremacy, patriarchy, able-bodied privilege, and how they shape who has power and value in our society. After all, you can't begin to solve a problem you can't even name.

Acknowledging that different groups occupy different reality bubbles in the digital realm and in the real world also means acknowledging that many, many stories are invisibilized by our modern social hierarchy. Storytelling is a form of manifesting power, and supremacist narratives overtake and invisibilize valuable communities and their needs. Believing these stories hold equal weight in the 'marketplace of ideas' erases countless stories and the reasons why which stories are considered valid and useful.

2. We must recognize the value and importance of multiple perspectives that exist simultaneously over the same issue, and uplift the voices of the most historically disadvantaged perspectives.

One of the core ways white supremacy wields cultural power is by invalidating other cultures. Multiple cultures intersect and interact at every level of our biggest societal problems, and the existence of many different perspectives does not mean that they infringe upon the validity of others. Perspectives are informed by our different experiences - individually, socially, and culturally - and this variance is key to what makes us human. The myth of a single, overarching truth and universal human experience has been wielded in the past to destroy indigenous ways of thinking and thousands of subcultures in Western society, and abolishing this notion is essential to create an equitable future.

Pluriversality directly confronts this myth by holding that many different perspectives and cultures are equally valid and important, and deserve the resources and space to communicate those perspectives to society at large. In a space dominated by a small, homogenous group, it becomes especially important to hold space for the most invisibilized cultures and their stories so that users can see, understand, and value alternatives to what already exists in the digital landscape.

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Of course, the core tenet of multiculturalism rejects the ideas of a single overarching truth, so naturally, there are tensions that arise between and among various historically disadvantaged groups regarding their perspectives on social problems and these tensions are inevitable and important.

But these tensions don't prohibit us from creating a more just and equitable digital world. Rather, the multicultural approach implores us to provide equal access and space to multiple perspectives so that they can be equally heard and debated in the public sphere, rather than routinely shutting out all cultures that deviate from the dominant single perspective online. Democracy, in its loosest definition as control of an organization or group by a majority of its members with equal votes, is dependent on the concept of a marketplace of ideas; individuals are presented with every option on the table and are able to choose which ones they prefer most. But a marketplace of ideas is impossible when systems of power keep underrepresented stories from accessing and participating in the digital space. Our civil and social structure, online and offline, necessarily suffers a dearth of ideas, thoughts, and stories if we consistently shut out the voices of people of color and all underrepresented identities.

3. Stories must be wielded towards the entities with the most power to enact real, substantive change.

The old adage of "speaking truth to power" is useful, but it's not enough to simply relay grievances to leaders in our society when those grievances have been historically ignored and swept under the rug. Rather, stories have to capture the human heart at the center of every struggle, touching on the distinct experiences of different cultures and the perspectives they bring while relating them to some universal aspects of the human experience: joy, grief, loss, love, pain, and community, to name a few. People in power can and do use digital tools to alienate their own humanity, reducing real world impacts and individual experiences to numbers and datasets that are disaggregated and anonymized. Re-centering those human perspectives in the stories we speak to power is key to breaking the reality bubbles offline and online, and forcing change in both worlds.

Though stories can be powerful, they are also not enough on their own. Digital inequity not only prevents all stories from being told, but often minimizes the ones that do enter the digital space. To truly harness the power of culture, storytelling has to be supported by organizing and innovation networks that do the difficult work of projecting those stories to powerful actors that can cause change. Transformative cultures must be enmeshed into every part of the social fabric of the organization: in the institutional values, habits, rituals, decision-making and behavioral patterns, procedures and policies that normally reproduce the larger white supremacy capitalist patriarchal system. Through political movements, social entrepreneurship endeavors, and organizational transformations, we can ensure a more equitable approach to the design of the digital landscape. These elements work in tandem to leverage many sources of transformative power into a broad coalition effort to secure equity in the digital space by fighting the problem on the most significant different fronts.

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The Think Rubix Approach

We believe that the transformative power of culture is within our people. Think Rubix, as a Black-led firm that values diversity in thought and experience, is inherently representative of a underrepresented culture that:

A. has an immense and impactful role in shaping the dominant culture of the US today,

B. is on the front lines of rethinking and reshaping the digital space to introduce equity, and

C. is uniquely positioned in the current evolving political, entrepreneurial, and digital landscape.

As a vertically integrated consultancy, our approach to solving digital injustice exists on three key fronts, creating a holistic framework that is able to analyze and solve problems socially, politically, and economically.

The Think Rubix approach to harnessing the transformative power of culture involves utilizing culture in four key ways. Our framework for harnessing the transformative power of culture holds these specific principles as integral to our approach:

1. We shape the larger culture towards one that centers equity and inclusion at the start. Black and brown people, queer people, disabled people, indigenous people, women, and other historically disadvantaged identities must be given access to the tools and resources they need to tell the stories that aren't currently being told. This includes government-provided resources like securing broadband access and digital education, but it also includes decisions at the organizational level to make sure underserved communities are given adequate access to tools and training they need to shape the digital realm in their own image and voice.

2. We leverage culture as a way to demystify the power of digital tools by centering how people use them to empower themselves. By abolishing the 'magical thinking' of technology as superior to and separate from human decision making, we can more accurately understand how society affects technology and vice versa. Therefore, the tools, the people, and the mechanisms become more visible - and, therefore, underserved people can use it for themselves.

3. We honor and value marginalized cultures as the primary leaders of the fight against digital inequity and trust their expertise over that of algorithms. When we and our clients deal with inequitable designs over which we have no control, we must trust the communities, relationships and organizations that aren't being represented in order to build a more equitable digital system.

4. We wield culture as the primary tool necessary for transformative change. By activating disenfranchised communities that both the offline and online worlds and the inequity that imbalance inevitably creates, we mobilize our networks into a broad political coalition that pushes for disruption to the unequal status quo at an organizational level and policy changes at the local, state, and federal levels to fight against digital inequity.

Ultimately, culture is made up of people and exists within and outside the technology we see in the world today. As quickly as digital tools are evolving, human-created technology is inherently just a reflection of the culture that already exists, so culture will always inherently change faster than the digital tools we create. If we want to change our digital tools so that they reproduce equity instead of harm, then we need to change the dominant culture first. Changing the dominant culture is only possible through visibilizing and supporting its alternatives. Black culture is an obvious cornerstone, but all other historically underserved cultures should also be uplifted as well.

To build a global community rife with opportunity, voice, and collaboration, the public square must be made equitable both in physical and digital environments. Fortunately, designing our collective future is not outside of our grasp. We have the ability to shape the digital space we all share, as long as we continue to push for what's possible. We have the culture, the means, and the voice - all we need to do now is transform.
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Think **Different**