talking about a world where only the children of lawyers and physicians and business executives will begin life with the advantages of a two-parent home.

But we must recognize that in the last 40 years we have done more than modify a few sexual mores and social customs. We have set in motion a variety of forces that will have devastating effects primarily on the lower half of American society. As a result of the dissolution of the traditional family since the 1960s—a phenomenon that has taken root particularly among poorer families—class segregation will increase and social mobility at the bottom will decline. And America's image of itself as one big middle-class society will wither away.

Charles Murray is the Bradley Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

In 1989, only 15 percent of Americans had a computer at home. By 2001 that was up to 52 percent. Fully 55 million Americans now go on line during an average day.

Computers, Computers Everywhere

By Karlyn Bowman

What word do you associate most with the 1990s? In a survey by the Pew Research Center, more people chose "technology" and "computers" than anything else. The rapid increase in the use of personal computers is surely one of the most significant developments of the 1990s. In July 1989, only 15 percent of Americans reported having a computer at home; by February 2001 that had risen more than threefold to 52 percent. Of the households with a computer nearly a quarter actually have more than one.

The Commerce Department reports that computer prices fell slightly more than 10 percent every year from 1987 to 1994; price declines accelerated to 26 percent annually from 1995 to 1999. Not only have computers become much cheaper over the past decade, they also have much more capability. Computers have raised productivity in the workforce, and enhanced personal communication. Following the events of September 11, millions of Americans went online to check on loved ones and read the latest news.

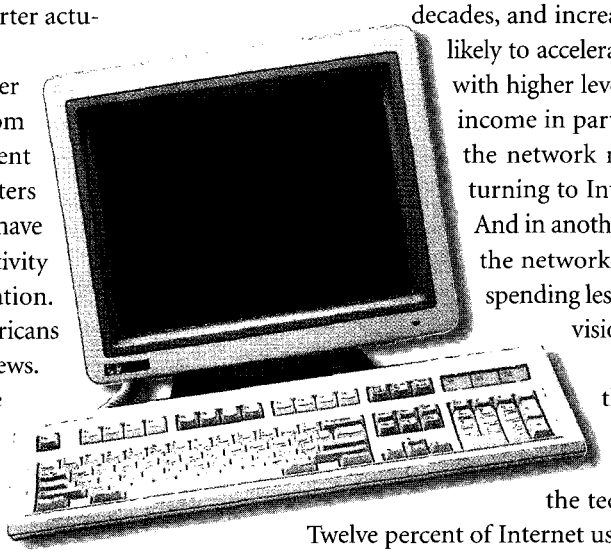
More than 300 million people worldwide now use the Internet, compared to 3 million in 1994. More than 100 million Americans have gone on line, and 55 million do so on an average day. The Internet audience is still skewed slightly to the young, the college educated, and those with higher incomes. But one of the big stories of the 1990s is that wired America began to look more like real America. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, "there has been a sharp increase in access to the Internet among those with less than college educations, those from households with middle- and working-class incomes, and, especially, among African Americans and Hispanics."

Differences in Internet access between men and women virtually disappeared in the 1990s, though the two sexes do use the Internet differently. Women are more likely to seek health and religious information. Men want news, financial information, and sports reports.

Young people often usher in change, particularly with new technologies. A Gallup Youth Survey of teens finds that nearly all—93 percent—say they have access to the Internet. Fully 86 percent of this age group have a computer at home. This tech-savvy generation reports it can usually figure out how to use computer equipment and software without outside help. At the other end of the age spectrum, meanwhile, a small pioneering group of older users (13 percent of Americans who are over age 65) are also experimenting with the Internet—mainly for communicating with family.

The most popular Internet activities are sending e-mail, getting news, and surfing. Just 3 percent say they go on line to trade stocks, bonds, or mutual funds, and only 1 percent have ever gambled on line. The Internet has become a news source in its own right, with one in three Americans regularly getting news solely from the Internet—up from 20 percent two years ago. The most popular type of Internet news? Weather updates.

The nightly television news audience has been shrinking for decades, and increasing Internet use is likely to accelerate that trend. Those with higher levels of education and income in particular are deserting the network news programs and turning to Internet news instead. And in another sign of trouble for the networks, Internet users are spending less time watching television overall.



The resilience of the new medium can be seen in the reaction of users to the tech-stock meltdown. Twelve percent of Internet users (13 million people) had a favorite Web site that went out of business. Most of them quickly found another to replace it.

Karlyn Bowman is TAE*'s Opinion Pulse editor.*

The Economy Soars, Schools Drag

By Ken Von Kohorn

Consider the contrast: America's free-enterprise economy barrels along throughout the 1990s, with minor interruptions, producing bountiful material wealth that is the envy of the world. We invent the Internet, create breakthrough technologies, learn how to treat illnesses in creative new ways, manufacture ever-improving consumer goods.

At the same time, in the same country, with the same productive people, a crucial activity—perhaps the most critical of all—languishes at levels near the bottom within the industrialized world. American schoolchildren regularly lag behind in international competitions. Millions of children—particularly minorities—are forced to attend schools that don't even teach them to read effectively, much less become well-educated members of society.

There is an anti-competitive spirit that pervades schooling in America. A country that has relied on competition to produce excellence in business, science, and industry has oddly allowed its educational system to fester under a stultifying government socialism. Our antiquated public school monopolies both waste resources and betray children. The real potential of millions of human beings will never be known.

Competition is shunned both in our choice of schools where children are taught and in the classroom itself, where striving among students has come to be seen by some as harmful to psyches. Differences between students are blurred. Work that decades ago might have received a "C" now merits an "A." Failing grades are virtually unheard of. In Greenwich, Connecticut's middle schools, fully two thirds of the students have been awarded "honor roll" status in recent years.

In one international math competition, the U.S. placed 19th out of 21 nations. The two below that were underdeveloped countries. At the same time, the *perception* of American students of their own math abilities scored the highest of all the participants. With boosting "self-esteem" now an explicit goal of education, educators lavish praise on students even for inadequate work, in their zeal to make them feel good about themselves. There has been a shift in emphasis in American education from *knowledge* to *feelings*.

One approach has been to lower the standards of academic measurement, either overtly or through grade inflation. Students in many schools have begun to receive credit for incorrect responses with the rationale that their answer was "close." Other assessments have changed from objective tests of knowledge to subjective "portfolios" and other measures that produce high grades for unchallenging work.

Even the venerable custom of recognizing valedictorians has begun to suffer from the anti-competition drive. Instead of giving the award to the top-ranked student, some schools have begun to set a threshold grade-point average and then designate everyone who exceeds it as a "valedictorian." In Fairfax County, Virginia, Lake Braddock High School named 19 valedictorians in 1997. Not to be outdone, Yorktown High in adjoining Arlington County anointed 33. A spokeswoman for Howard County, Maryland schools said, "We feel that graduation is a time to recognize the achievements of all students and not just the ones at the top of their class." In 1993, Maryland's Montgomery County abolished class rank on college transcripts entirely, because of the "competitive ill will and the college application difficulties created by a steady surge in the number of straight-A students." The participation of county schools in an overheated grade inflation that could create so many straight-A students went unexplained.

One of the unintended consequences of eliminating competition is that it deprives students of crucial growth opportuni-

ties. Psychologists like Dr. Martin Seligman, author of *The Optimistic Child*, have found through research with hundreds of students that failure provides an invaluable learning experience. So long as children are taught to consider their shortfalls as isolated events, triggered by specific causes (such as not preparing thoroughly for a test), they develop a more realistic sense of the world. By making adjustments (like studying harder for the next test), children can turn failure into accomplishment—and thereby acquire a more optimistic perspective of reality. Optimism that difficulties can be surmounted helps them cope with later (and tougher) challenges. By discouraging competition, educators deprive students of crucial personal development. They also prepare children for a non-existent world where everyone gets credit and no one fails.

Declining standards were obvious even to 13-year-old me back in 1963. That was the year I shifted from public