

Introduction

In the early light following the dawn of the Information Age we can already see how accustomed our society has become to advances in information technology. Where computers were once the provenance of “techies” and the young, now grandparents routinely use email to keep in contact with their families. Satellite networks, fiber optics, and cell phones are creating a world of constant interconnection. The bursting of the dot.com bubble deflated the hype but even so spectacular a melt-down could not detract from the obvious: our embrace of this technology is unshakable. The revolution may not be televised but it will be wireless.

The changes we have wrought, however, do not come without challenges. Asymmetries of access create serious questions of equity, and the hyperkinetic pace of the information-based economy can overwhelm the slower rhythms and responses of our polity and culture. These challenges are being engaged, and efforts to redress the digital divide are under way across the country. While still at an early stage, the promise of information technology for boosting civic engagement and bridging the gap between citizens and government is likewise being explored. The devolution of government authority from the federal to the state and local levels and the recalcitrance of political and social problems to existing policy measures have created a new environment in which individuals of all walks of life must come together as stakeholders to elaborate new forms of governance. Information technology is becoming an important part of this process.¹

Civic engagement and public deliberation are essential components of government, democracy, and politics. This report details how information technology is being used to develop new forms of these practices that enhance communication and understanding between citizens and their local government. In addition to the Internet itself, advanced technologies such as geographical information systems (GIS), global positioning systems (GPS), handheld computers, and digital cameras have proven to be particularly important in improving the quality and

extent of civic engagement and public deliberation. By making it easier to collect and disseminate information about the existing physical and social infrastructure, the use of these technologies enhances the process of civic networking at the local level. Communities with robust civic networks have governments that listen and respect the needs of an active and engaged citizenry. This report concludes with case studies examining specific examples of communities and organizations that are using information technology to bridge the gap between citizens and local government.

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