

Center for American Progress



What Happened to the Third Wave Netizen?
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October 18, 2007

"For the society, the impact will be good or bad depending mainly on the question: Will 'to be on line' be a privilege or a right? If only a favored segment of the population gets a chance to enjoy the advantage of 'intelligence amplification,' the network may exaggerate the discontinuity in the spectrum of intellectual opportunity."
J. C. R. Licklider, and R. Taylor. (1968, April).¹

Long before the laughing baby or the dancing baby appeared on YouTube, long before YouTube was invented, the pioneers of what we now call the Internet were convinced that "intelligence amplification" could be a major contribution to democracy and civic engagement. They were convinced that computers and networked computers could be used to improve the ability of governments to serve citizens and that information and computer technology could improve the ability of citizens to participate, monitor and exert their will over what our elected officials do.

¹ J. C. R. Licklider, and R. Taylor. (1968, April). The computer as a communication device. *Science and Technology: For the Technical Man in Management*, 76:21-31.

Esther Dyson, George Gilder and Alvin Toffler were concerned that what they called Second Wave institutions and priorities, such as concentrated broadcast and print media, command and control industrial-style organizational systems, and burdensome government market regulations, would hamper the development of a Third Wave made possible by cyberspace. They and others downplayed the importance of inequalities, after all the newly perceived laws of technology would dramatically lower the costs of computer chips and enabling software would be given away.² In his book “Being Digital” Nicholas Negroponte went so far as to claim that there will be not digital have nots, only digital want nots.

The technologists argued that when a free market and the magic of digital technology were allowed to marry unfettered by old rules and outdated regimes, this Third Wave would produce a new netizen. Netizens would provide the answers to whatever problems might occur through the development of new on-line communities and associations. With ready access to a world of libraries and research netizens would solve all of the old problems and all of the new problems; they would make invisible all the dividing lines marking the borders of city and town, or the distinctions between local and global. While netizens were undoubtedly democratic they would make all the mechanisms of democracy or any sort of government nearly irrelevant.

The ability of China to curb the freedom of the seemingly unstoppable Google, and the more limited and clumsy efforts of U.S. and other regimes to alter and warp the content of public (i.e. government) web sites to downplay the potential problems of oil exploration in Alaska or the effects of global warming have thrown at least a little cold

² E. Dyson et al, Cyberspace & the American Dream, A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age: <http://www.pff.org/issues-pubs/futureinsights/fi1.2magnacarta.html>

water on some of the more rapturous dreams about the Internet. Reality, as usual, proceeds unpredictably and sometimes painfully slowly.

If a bold nation of netizens remains as elusive as the reliable computer, it would be a mistake to ignore the cautious efforts of the thousands of civil servants and computer designers who have worked to apply information and communications technologies to the hard and messy work of governance and civic life.

It may be useful to divide our consideration of ICT and civic participation into two categories: 1) the content made possible by the medium of the Internet, or Internet as media; and 2) the processes made possible by the Internet. Internet as media is fairly straightforward, so we shall take that first.

Internet as Media and Civic Engine

Federal, state and local governments put information up on the web. This information ranges from the clearly political messages boasting of accomplishments (new bridges dedicated, babies kissed, eloquent speeches and other amusements) to useful information, such as how to apply for a driver's license or where to dump dangerous household chemicals. Thousands of local, state and national governments are on line with sometimes very useful information about their schools, or basic services, or business opportunities. Some put up information about the local weather and population and real estate values, some put up information describing their court systems and how to contact police or fire or other emergency services. The range of content available is nearly as diverse as the range of governments themselves.

Cities are also putting other services online. Hundreds of local governments will allow you to pay water and sewer bills online, in addition to registering an automobile, or paying a parking ticket. Some cities are also providing a way to ask questions via e-mail to which government workers will respond via e-mail about everything from curb cuts to special garbage pick-up to barking dogs. What is especially noteworthy is the impact of Internet technologies on the operation of governance.

Mayor Graham Richard of Fort Wayne, Indiana convinced his city council to invest in a very sophisticated software program that combines geographic information system (GIS) technology with 24-hour caller service systems and cutting edge computer programs that allows the city to compile vast databases of reported incidents and predict when problems might arise, respond more effectively to recurring problems and better meet the needs of citizens.

The city of Fort Wayne adopted a 311 system to supplement the 911 system it ran. Like many cities, Fort Wayne found its 911 system flooded with calls that were not true emergencies, such as dogs barking, or street lights that went out. This problem only increased with the increased prevalence of cell phones. The 311 system was a way to provide citizens with a quick and easy to remember number for any question or problem they wanted to raise with the city. Combining this one-stop communications system with GIS technology allowed the city to map the number of complaints about things like reports of dark street lights and to actually begin to predict when the lights on a street needed to be replaced. The computer program helped city officials anticipate problems, and more efficiently serve the needs of citizens. Citizens reported greater confidence in city officials and better responsiveness.

At the federal level, the site GovBenefits.gov provides one easy to reach point of access to locate information and determine eligibility for government benefits and services. It receives approximately 300,000 visits per month and has provided nearly 1 million visitors referrals to benefit programs. The IRS free filing service assisted nearly 4 million citizens in 2006 file taxes. Over 100,000 resumes are created on USAJobs.gov each month and the site receives over 240,000 visits dai³ly from job seekers looking for career opportunities with the Federal government.

Courts are also engaged in substantial online activity. In Kentucky, you can check the public docket and court calendar on line. In Texas, you can file a court grievance online and answer online. There are far more opinions on line from local, state and federal courts and judges than ever before.

E-Democracy

We have not yet arrived at online voting for more than television game show contests, but you can download documents that will allow you to register to vote. Regarding, e-democracy the great hope was the online activity of e-mail to complain to or petition politicians, but most elected officials have found ways to ignore the deluge of e-mail generated by MoveOn.org or the Heritage Foundation.⁴ But there is little question that with the successful Internet fund-raising of both Howard Dean and John Kerry that there are more politicians online, announcing candidacy, detailing positions, and sometimes responding directly to citizens online during live chat sessions or blogs. The

³ Report to Congress on the Benefits of the President's E-Government Initiatives, Fiscal Year 2007 at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/inforeg/infopoltech.html#egov>

⁴ Ed Davis, "House Blocking Email," Common Cause, June 12, 2006 at <http://www.commonblog.com/story/2006/6/12/9336/73948>

2004 presidential campaign saw 75 million Americans go to the Internet to get news, exchange email with candidates, and contribute directly to the political process.⁵

The YouTube debate of this summer was further proof of the increasing importance of e-democracy. This past July, the field of eight Democrats running for President faced 40 of some 3,000 questions submitted via online video clips to YouTube. But as Larry Sabato, director of the Center for Politics, University of Virginia, told the BBC, "It's an innovation and it involved the public and especially young people, and that's all to the good. "Did it fundamentally change the nature of the debate? No."⁶

The Digital Divide

One problem was that the questioners lacked the opportunity to follow up on their video-clip questions. Another problem, as the Washington Post reported in the community of Cooper River Courts, a little more than a mile from where the YouTube debate took place, few residents even own a computer. As Marcella Morris said, "I am low-income and computers are not low-income. I know how to use a computer. I just can't afford one right now."⁷ Computer access at home in the U.S. is at best around 65 percent.

⁵ Lee Rainie, et al, "E-Gov & E-Policy", Pew Internet and American Life Project, March 6, 2005 at http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/150/report_display.asp

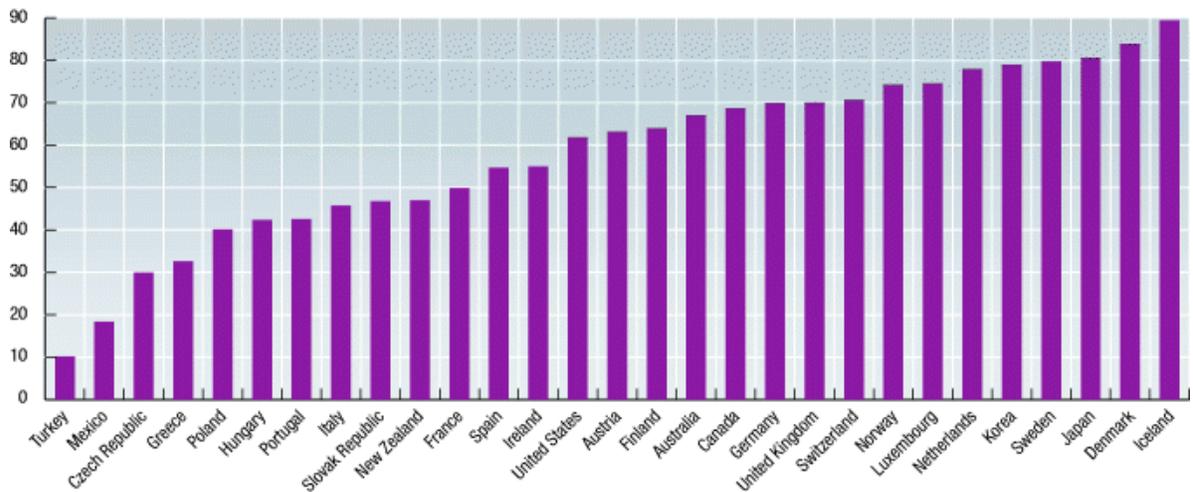
⁶ Laura Smith-Spark, "YouTube debate: hype or history?," BBC News, July 24m 2007 at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6914544.stm>

⁷ Jose Antonio Vargas, "Binary America: Split in Two by a Digital Divide," *Washington Post*, July 23, 2007, at C01, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/22/AR2007072201278.html>.

OECD

Households with access to a home computer

Percentage of all households, 2005 or latest available year



Statlink : <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/415703732862>

In addition to the relatively low rate of computer access, as YouTube makes clear, in order to use their service effectively, “You’ll need a broadband connection with at least 500+Kbps for the best viewing experience.”⁸ Many so-called broadband dsl speeds only approach about a half of what you need to watch video online. As Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet and American Life Project said of the YouTube debate, “It’s certainly not available to all Americans.”

⁸ *Why Does the Video Keep Stopping and Starting While I’m Watching It?* <http://www.google.com/support/youtube/bin/answer.py?answer=56116&ctx=sibling> (last visited Sept. 20, 2007).

And so we return to our opening quote from the founding fathers of the Internet:
"For the society, the impact will be good or bad depending mainly on the question: Will
'to be on line' be a privilege or a right? If only a favored segment of the population gets a
chance to enjoy the advantage of 'intelligence amplification,' the network may exaggerate
the discontinuity in the spectrum of intellectual opportunity."

Unequal access to city services, to the courts, to government benefits and job
opportunities, to political debate spell trouble for our society. The uneven distribution of
access to advanced telecommunications services at home in the U.S. as compared to
Canada, Europe or Japan suggests that a deregulated U.S. market in the U.S. and weak
universal service supports will not alone protect the noble vision of the netizen riding the
third wave into the future.

About Mark Lloyd

Mark Lloyd is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress and an affiliated professor at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute.

From the fall of 2002 until the summer of 2004, Mr. Lloyd was a Martin Luther King, Jr. visiting scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he taught communications policy and wrote and conducted research on the relationship between communications policy and strong democratic communities. He also served as the executive director of the Civil Rights Forum on Communications Policy, a non-profit, non-partisan project he co-founded in 1997 to bring civil rights principles and advocacy to the communications policy debate.

Previously, Mr. Lloyd worked as general counsel to the Benton Foundation, and as a communications attorney at Dow, Lohnes & Albertson in Washington, D.C., representing both commercial and non-commercial companies. He also has over a dozen years of experience as a broadcast journalist including work as a reporter and producer at NBC and CNN.

A widely-published author in both popular and academic publications, his book *Prologue to a Farce: Communication and Democracy in America* was released by the University of Illinois Press in 2007.