

NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT

The cooling off of the dot com economy ends a phase in the trajectory that information technology (IT) has been blazing across our society. Like a booster rocket propelling a satellite into orbit, speculative mania and turbocharged rhetoric fueled an explosive growth in IT. Although this wild ride is now literally and figuratively spent, its positive effects can be seen in the widespread adoption and implementation of information-based technologies in all sectors of society.

Looking past the current disarray in the high-tech industry, we can begin to assess more clearly the force these technologies exert on the direction of our society. One of the most telling indicators of this influence is how remote in time the pre-Internet world seems. We now take for granted the ability to search for information and make purchases at the click of a mouse. As anyone who has switched from a modem to DSL access can testify, in this new world there is simply no going back.

Information-based technologies have great promise for transforming far more than how Americans shop or surf for news and entertainment. The ease and rapidity with which information can be collected, stored, searched, and transmitted creates new opportunities and raises new concerns. On the one hand, barriers to participation in the political process can be dramatically lowered, keeping citizens informed and engaged; at the local level, greater community involvement can be encouraged through means such as neighborhood listservs and e-mail alerts. On the other hand, there are a number of serious questions concerning privacy safeguards, the openness of the Internet, and the ultimate impact of IT on our form of government.

For this reason, the National Civic League has again chosen to focus its annual conference on the interaction between IT and civic engagement. This year's national conference on governance, titled *Digital Democracy: Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century*, evaluates how the expanding use of information-based technologies is affecting politics, government, and community building.

The articles in this issue of the journal complement the focus of the conference. Although a range of themes are discussed, all of the articles relate to the ongoing development of digital democracy, or "e-democracy." We are still at an early point in this process, but some tentative conclusions can be made. In each central area—politics, government, and community building—there is now a sufficient track record to get a clearer sense of how well and to what ends information-based technologies are being used. Given the scale of the changes that are occurring, it is not surprising to discover that problems are being encountered. But IT has unmistakably moved from being something of a novelty to being part of the infrastructure supporting the daily activities of governments, citizens, and community organizations across the country.

The transactional efficiency and round-the-clock availability of information-based technologies ensure their expanded use. Driven in part by the

demands of e-commerce, applications have become versatile and user-friendly. Not surprisingly, e-procurement was one area in which governments made early use of this technology.

Lowering barriers to adoption has accelerated the diffusion of IT into non-commercial areas as well. Although the rate of increase in Internet usage has slowed recently, it is clear that the volume and range of activities undertaken using IT will continue to grow. For example, a number of jurisdictions are now linking detailed geographic information system maps to databases of local government activities to pinpoint problems and improve the efficiency of service delivery. As technological capabilities increase and service and other costs decrease, governments and other users will make further application of these technologies.

One prospect being debated today holds particular importance for developing e-democracy. The interactive capability of connecting citizens with government officials through such means as real-time “netcasting”—of a committee meeting or conducting an online survey or opinion poll—prefigures the possibility of creating an institutional arrangement to foster direct rather than representative democracy. Given the existing structure of our political system, the degree to which such an arrangement could or should be created is unclear. However, the possibility points up one of the central underlying issues regarding e-democracy and the impact of IT on civic engagement. Information-based technologies can make certain outcomes more probable by reducing barriers or increasing efficiencies. But no decision about how to make use of new technologies occurs in a vacuum. There is always a political context that shapes development of the technology and influences the choice about how and to what ends the technology is used.

In other words, technology gives us choices, but we are the ones who must make them. The Internet can be merely a medium for private entertainment, but it can also become a means for public deliberation. Its existence does not increase political participation without people choosing to take advantage of its possibilities and become better informed and more engaged. Through this issue of the *National Civic Review* and this year’s national conference on governance, the National Civic League hopes to encourage debate and reflection on how we want to use information-based technologies to advance democratic values and civic engagement.

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