



ALLIANCE FOR
CONVERGING
TECHNOLOGIES

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December 17, 1999

President Bill Clinton
The White House

Dear Mr. President,

You and your administration set the conditions for economic prosperity and the transformation of America to the Digital Economy. You now have an historic opportunity to also reenergize citizen participation in the governing process and revitalize democracy for the 21st century.

You were correct in seeing the power of the Net as a new infrastructure for the creation of wealth. You encouraged its growth, avoiding unnecessary regulation and taxes. You helped nurture the development of the converging computer, telecommunications and content industries – that now directly contribute over \$1 trillion to the US economy. As a result of the Internet, new business models are emerging that are destroying the old models of the firm and leading to unprecedented economic prosperity. Agoras like eBay, Aggregations like E*trade, Digital Value Chains like Cisco, Self-organizing Alliances like Linux and the new Distributive Networks like Enron and FEDEX are all driving commerce. For the first time ever we see the possibility of long-term, sustainable economic growth. We are entering a new economy where the Internet changes the rules for success and transforms the basic institutions for the creation of goods and services,

But to paraphrase John Kennedy, we should not ask what governments can do for the Net, it's what the Net can do for governance. So far there has been considerable progress in using new technology to improve the functioning of governments — better cheaper government, in the words of Vice-President Al Gore. As consumers of government services and laws, citizens are receiving increasingly improved products. In this area much remains to be done, such as delivering more services electronically, flattening government structures, and streamlining bureaucracy.

However, the next challenge is to rethink the citizen as a shareholder or owner of government and revitalize the process of governance itself. The Internet is a powerful tool that could dramatically improve the working relationship between citizens and the state.

You were the first President to initiate online chats where people from all walks of life could ask you questions. In doing so you made the fireside chat a real exchange. However this is just a hint of the possibilities offered by the Net. The Net can catalyze new democratic processes, empowering people – enabling them to learn, influence lawmakers in new ways, and influence each other, perhaps even breaking down so many of the walls that divide us in America.

Mr. President
from Don Tapscott
Page 2

Our democracy is clearly ailing. Voter participation has slumped to record low levels. Citizens feel increasingly detached from the electoral process. Political figures often appear to be obsessed with the wrong issues and locked into intransigent positions. Voters see government as something that is done *to* the people and not *by* the people.

Government in the industrial era was built on representative institutions, with citizen involvement being limited to periodic elections. In the digital era, the demand will be for participatory models in which "having your say" means more than a trip to the polling booth every four years. Citizens will insist on moving from being passive consumers to active partners.

We shouldn't be surprised that a new medium of human communications would lead to a new world of possibilities for governance. Libraries based on clay documents enabled the priest-based monopoly of knowledge in ancient Babylon. The invention of papyrus scrolls and the alphabet was a key to the limited democracy of Greek city states and the rule of law in ancient Rome. The improved portability, ease of use and durability of parchment-based, bound books created by the papacy and monastic orders were critical to the speed of conversion to Christianity. Paper and the printing press reproduced religious text in the vernacular and led to the Reformation, the end of feudalism and the emergence of parliamentary democracy in tandem with the industrial revolution.

Once again the economic and technological genie has been unleashed from its bottle. Summoned, perhaps unwillingly or unknowingly by the drive for profit, the genie is now at our service to transform the political power grid established by the old order of economic life.

Today's "ordinary people" are armed with more robust information than ever before. They are empowered – perhaps even overwhelmed at times – by the ready availability of knowledge and choices that previous generations could only dream about. The Internet creates the opening for new forms of interaction with the citizen, to allow real-time participation in the governmental and democratic process. The new information technologies are collaborative, immediate, involving, empowering — not words always associated with government consultations or policy development exercises.

In the 1992 election, many people cringed when Ross Perot proposed the electronic town hall, conjuring the image of the electronic mob. To many observers, voting "yes" or "no" from your home or place of work could be dangerous. In addition, the possibility of manipulation, such as daily referenda could actually undermine a true democratic process that is based on participation. Motions put to a vote are usually well refined distillations of large and complex issues. They result from a long process involving conflicts, contradictions and compromises. To understand a motion and to vote responsibly citizens need to participate in some form of refining process.

Mr. President
from Don Tapscott
Page 3

But as an alternative to the electronic town hall, technology could be used to tap into the diverse insights and expertise in a community. An interactive system could allow people to ask questions, make suggestions and give opinions to a legislative body. These inputs influences the legislators, who as elected representatives are the final decision-makers.

Alternately, the Internet could enable new groups of like interests and views to come together in ways that previously would have been unfeasible or impractical. Instead of relying on geographical boundaries, voting districts could be allocated to affinity groups that reach certain thresholds of size.

The technology can also be used to simulate various outcomes and understand the impact of various decisions. For example, rhetoric about cuts to social programs for deficit reduction is easy. But through simulating the impact of cuts on other aspects of the economy, various demographic and racial groups, lawmakers and other stakeholders can come to a deeper understanding of the impact of legislation on complex systems.

A number of promising experiments are underway via the Web to re-engage citizen interest and involvement. While many participants are excited about the possibilities no one knows for sure what the new democracy should look like.

Rather than government leaders trying to work all this out in isolation and then informing citizens, you could initiate a broad process to force a new consensus – using the Net itself. Prototype the new process of governance. Discussion papers could be posted on the Web. You could hold a series of online forums that could extend over weeks or even months. Interest groups could be encouraged to use the Net to stimulate discussion within their own organizations. Experts could be involved and make their expertise available to the public. Every so often votes could be held to suggest the direction of further discussion or suggest what other methods of online brainstorming could be employed.

One of the most important things you could do is to involve youth in these discussions. They will be profoundly affected by any changes and also be the leaders for the 21st century. Most important, they will be a key source of insights. The children of the baby boom, aged 2-22, are the Net Generation – the first generation to grow up surrounded by digital media digital. Today's kids are so bathed in bits that they think it's all part of the natural landscape. To them the digital technology is no more intimidating than a VCR or toaster.

For the first time in history, children are more comfortable, knowledgeable, and literate than their parents about an innovation central to society. And it is through the use of the digital media that the Net-Generation will develop and superimpose its culture on the rest of society. Already these kids are learning, playing, communicating, working, and creating communities very differently than their parents. They are a force for social transformation.

Mr. President
from Don Tapscott
Page 4

Moms and dads are reeling from the challenges of raising confident, plugged-in, and digital-savvy children who know more about technology than they do. Few parents even know what their children are doing in cyberspace. School officials are grappling with the reality of students often being far smarter on cyber-issues and new ways of learning than the teachers. Corporations are wondering what these kids will be like as employees since they are accustomed to very different ways of working, collaborating, and creating and they reject many basic assumptions of today's companies. Marketers have little comprehension of how this wave will shape and influence purchases of goods and services.

This generation is accustomed to empowerment, open discussion, and immediacy—all antithetical to the disempowerment, myopic discussion, and bureaucratic governance processes of today. They want to interact and get to the bottom of things, to sift information and decide. They care deeply about social problems and cannot comprehend why governments seem so ineffectual. Their orientation is their neighborhood and their global virtual communities, not the nation state. They are used to being actors not spectators. Their insight will be critical to fully exploiting the Web's potential.

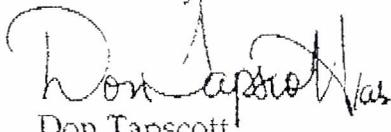
Why not have one of the first policy discussions focus on the digital divide? No initiative to revitalize democracy, however well meaning and attractive, can be considered effective when access to the Internet is not universal. Without full access, no proposal to reinvigorate the governing process can be deemed fundamentally democratic. For the health of the country and our political process, we must eliminate the growing digital divide.

Begin on a Monday and end the first round on a Friday. You could frame the issue as you did in your December 9 press briefing. Co-ordinate the discussion and summarize some suggested next steps at the end, including the creation of sub groups. One might address the issue of taxation and examine the feasibility of an Internet-access tax credit for low-income families. Another could focus on corporate initiatives like funding and nourishing the creation of community computing centers. Educators could create a discussion on the challenges of getting access in the schools.

The Internet's potential for generating fresh insight, engaging and empowering citizens is truly unlimited.

If we do this right, in a decade or two democracy in America will be much different and much better than it is today.

Yours truly,



Don Tapscott
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President and CEO, New Paradigm Learning Corporation