Much of the discussion and debate around the "digital divide" has focused on the gap between "haves" and "have-nots" with respect to either technology access, or equitable (if not equal) access to the benefits associated with technology. Such an "either/or" view omits what is truly pernicious about the "digital divide" in America across any number of dividing lines-- the inability to participate in civic life due to the very tools that seek, in part, to improve broader visibility and accountability in our public and private institutions.

In their infancy, the Internet in general, and the Web in particular, were considered top-down media, based solely on pushing research and technical information out to others with both similar technical capacity and knowledge. The convergence of growth in interest from audiences in government, business, public interest groups, and the public has led to rapid development in both online information dissemination and interaction. The growth in technology capacity has raised demands to use that technology for enhanced and increased service provision from all sectors in our society. As the demand for services grows, so do the expectations that users can be connected directly to the sources of information and services provided. Ultimately, the same pipeline through which information is provided becomes a means through which citizen voices can, and will, be directed at institutions.

A group of Brown University researchers looked at 1,813 federal, state, and local websites for the quality and effectiveness of electronic government. Unfortunately, they found that only 5% of government websites had a security policy; only 7% of government websites had a privacy policy; only 15% government websites provided the means for disability access, only 4% offered content in another language besides English, and only 22% offered some means for conducting transactions with government.

There was good news, however. Of the chief information officers surveyed in the same study, 86% said e-government improved service delivery, 83% felt it increased efficiency, and 64% believed it reduced costs. In terms of responsiveness, a whopping 91% of government websites responded to an e-mail request for official office hours, with three-quarters of those sites responding within one business day. This suggests that if government sees a value in "e-government", it stands a good chance of success.

Two obstacles towards this goal are "opacity" and "redlining." Opacity refers to the incomprehensible context in which content is presented. A search engine query conducted through a portal (which in itself, draws content from multiple sources) may yield a lengthy, yet incoherent laundry list of links. Without an explanation of where the links point to, or why they are relevant, a user will be frustrated to no small degree. Redlining, albeit a structural issue, is nonetheless a tricky one, as it reflects the willing or unconscious exclusion of information sources and content, thus reflecting the bias of the content producer.

E-government, when and if it works, can enhance access to and delivery of information and services to citizens, partners, employees, cross-agency, and other entities, and can lead to simple, clearly understood, and consistently implied standards regarding government information and services-- but only if people can get to it. Without the means to navigate content through non-technical terms, in relevant languages, or in a manner accessible to those with special needs (such as Internet connection speeds, physical limitations) technology poses a challenge as much as it does a solution.

The individual approaches of e-government serve as a useful window for analyzing the premium that society places not only on technology, but access and use of government resources to address pressing individual and collective needs. Content-rich sites may satisfy the most experienced user who knows what s/he wants, yet confuse the novice users in a sea of details. Sites that provide only minimum, basic details may provide a useful starting point for citizens unfamiliar with government processes, yet serve as
a poor overall resource for active civic actors interested in specific activity. If e-government in practice inevitably caters to the information and design needs of some at the expense of others, then greater input needs to come from those who are not able to participate.

The constraints faced by government resources to think through, develop, test, and implement new approaches to expand and approve the range of interactions and services it offers, much less revamping what it currently offers to meet a huge range of simultaneous audience demands places a large responsibility on government itself. This creates an environment of numerous, sometimes conflicting, rules for gathering, dissemination, and sharing of data. As more and more government entities come online, there will be greater need for consistency and standardization. Those end users, including public interest groups and community actors, who monitor government activity on a regular basis, can only further enhance an online government resource. Because these entities also serve as conduits for citizen concerns, they have a useful dual perspective on how information is accessed and how it is used, and can also engage the public in input and feedback for those resources that serve them.

The desirability to deliver e-government must, however, be attended by the reasons why it is relevant for citizens. If the Internet holds promise for enriching and improving the lives of Americans, it is not because it offers a myriad of shopping and advertising opportunities. The ability to access useful, quality information on health, fair lending practices, educational materials, job openings, and other community specific information makes the potential of the Internet real for everyone. The act of providing access to a computer misses the importance of providing a means for underrepresented voices to have chance for civic participation.

Access to the Internet and knowledge about the use of computers have become an expectation and an obligation for economic, social, political, and civic participation. That is why not only private sector efforts are welcome, but public initiatives are critical. To instill confidence in systems which leads to both increased repeated use, users need not only feel satisfied but secure in the their experience. One means to this end might include outreach and training to citizens around their use, not only online, but also in person where people are most likely to access the Internet itself. Where and how people access the Internet affects their overall experience and their user satisfaction, at home, work, libraries, community centers, and even public kiosks.

Among the successful federal investments in both public information infrastructure and citizen-centered training around its use are programs like the Education Department's Community Technology Centers program, the Commerce Department's Technology Opportunities Program, the Housing and Urban Development's Neighborhood Networks initiative in housing projects, and the Labor Department's One Stop job information centers. They have been invaluable to increasing both citizen awareness and citizen use of electronic government resources. Moreover, they have given groups across every sector imaginable-- including libraries, community action agencies and technology centers, schools, churches, government agencies, nonprofits, businesses, and volunteers-- the opportunity to partner with government to enhance our social capital at a local, state, regional, and national level, with measurable success.

The Internet, and many of the tools necessary to access it, was developed in no small part through research supported by federal dollars-- the money of the people. In order to justify the investments that have been made in the information architecture, the Internet has to be viewed as a public good that is available to all citizens. In order to justify its involvement in the development of the Internet, government must also use the opportunities afforded by the medium to make itself more accessible and accountable to the public.

Back in May 2000, an "online experiment" was launched to allow citizens to express their opinions regarding ways the federal government can provide improved content and more services via the Internet, initiated by United States Senators Fred Thompson (R-TN) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT), respectively the Chairman and Ranking Democrat on the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee. The effort was
titled "e-Government: An Experiment in Interactive Legislation," and the idea is that the comments received would be used in legislation considered later this year. It serves as bipartisan approach towards engaging citizen input about how government can take advantage of online resources to serve the public better, by taking comments online in a "virtual hearing," rather than simply introducing legislation that lays out ambiguous goals for government. Further use of these tools would allow end users provide their voice in the development and delivery of goods in which they have an interest or a stake, as opposed to passively receiving content or information from an online source or entity.

Another example of online input-gathering from citizens was the federal Web-based Education Commission, a 16-member panel that examined ways to engage the education and Internet communities jointly in order to create online learning opportunities and environments. WBEC was one of the first Congressional commissions to accept "e-testimony," collecting comments into a database of submitted testimony, searchable by name or type of organization or individual, as well as educational or policy interest.

As more citizens learn to take advantage of online resources to learn more about the workings of government, to enhance and inform their daily routines and civic participation, they will begin to crave more knowledge around the workings of government, which in turn begins to fuel a desire for accountability, performance measures, and better integration or collaboration among the government entities that affect them. This means that e-government must also be supported by government's willingness to actually use the tools it makes available to the public, and incorporate them into existing practice, if not on a day-to-day basis, then in some form which justifies the investment in time and resources.

The next phase of e-government is predicated on connecting end users directly to their institutions. This will mean more than providing an e-mail address for a webmaster or single-point-of-contact within an organization. It will require personalization, faster access, and other advanced services that dictate new rules of interaction, in effect forcing online organizations to decide how much of their traditional offline roles could be devoted to engaging users while trying to provide as comprehensive a range of services themselves. As more of these functions are delivered through outsourced services, nonprofits and citizens groups in particular should lend their input and expertise towards the deliberations and considerations around the needs services should address. This will help to ensure that government does not operate in a manner such that public interest obligations are ignored. All government online entities should be encouraged, during this period, to develop more collaboration around systems design that incorporates shared knowledge and experiences with a wide range of user expectations and demands.

The "digital divide" is as much about the lack of opportunities for civic participation through limited knowledge about the opportunities technology affords, as it is due to understanding of technology itself. As governments continue to become even more responsive to the needs of their citizenry, their mandate is clear: be visible, accessible, usable, and useful. Online government resources are public resources, and should not be presented to the public in any form that presents a "digital divide" to citizens—whether it be barriers to technology access or knowledge that prevents the widest base of users from accessing information. To do so is to put a wall between users and the institutions charged to serve them.

1 "Assessing E-Government: The Internet, Democracy, and Service Delivery by State and Federal Governments," Darrell M. West, professor of political science and director of Brown University's Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions, <http://www.insidepolitics.org/egovreport00.html> (September 2000). The study included 1,716 state government websites, 36 federal government legislative and executive sites, and 61 federal court sites, and featured an e-mail survey of chief information officers in each state and 38 agencies.

2 "Political Portals and Democracy: Threats and Promises." Steve M. Schneider iMP Magazine (May 2000), <http://www.cisp.org/imp/may_2000/05_00schneider.htm>

3 <http://cct.georgetown.edu/development/eGov>
4 <http://www.webcommision.org>