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Information, Access and Opportunity
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Good morning everyone.

I want to add my personal welcome to those of Lee Hamilton and Eddie Williams, and also thank them and their organizations for helping us on the President's Information Technology Advisory Committee to deepen our understanding of what's become known as the "digital divide."

And Congressman Rangel . . . thank you for joining us this morning.

Your presence is one more indication that the nation's leaders in Congress and the Administration are coming to grips with this momentous issue, and are determined to give it the high priority it deserves.

This emerging national will to continue the IT revolution has produced an Administration initiative called "Information Technology for the 21st Century" -- or "IT Squared," as it's come to be known -- and Congressman Sensenbrenner's House Science Committee bill.

Together, they constitute a blueprint that can help our country transform itself into an information-based society.

And as that process goes on, the question that is -- or should be -- on everyone's mind is: Where will that transformation lead?

Will it lead to greater opportunity for all? Or will only the affluent profit?

Will this be a transformation just for Wall Street, the Fortune 1,000, and the new "dot-com's"? Or will Main Street and the millions participate fully?

Will all the blessings of access to information and high-speed communications come to Washington Heights in Manhattan, South Central LA, and all the under-served communities in between?

Or will the "digital divide" persist, deepen and eventually become a fault line running through our society?

Anyone who has read the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's report on the "digital divide" knows that African Americans, Native Americans and my own Hispanic community have the least exposure to information technology of any segment of our society.

Yet together, we constitute an enormous portion of American society.

We must join with the rest of our country as it undergoes a transformation every bit as profound as the Industrial Revolution.

Every one of us -- Hispanics, Native Americans, African Americans -- indeed all Americans -- must learn to use information technology for the wonderful and productive tool it was intended to be. And we must help as well to create the IT revolution.

We must seriously consider participating, in the research that lies ahead to solve some very complex technical issues, and in the study of the impact of IT on our society.

We must learn and work together to make IT a tool to help transform our society in the most positive of ways.

We must all be a part of that transformation -- shaping it, contributing to it, and -- yes -- even profiting from it.

We must work together with others -- with industry, government, the university community, and public interest groups -- to make a difference.

And to do that, we must know the technology . . . what it can mean in our lives and to our communities, and most important to our future.

Now, one might ask, what exactly does information technology mean to our country?

To put it very simply, IT means jobs, productivity, and a rising standard of living.

By some estimates, the IT industry has accounted for a third of total US economic growth since 1992, and created millions of high-paying jobs, many of which didn't exist before.

The importance of IT to our ability to earn a living, to add value to an employer, or to raise living standards in the inner city or small-town America will only grow, as we weave information technology more and more into the fabric of our society.

IT's growing importance to our economy has been clear for some time. What's different today is that the Internet is connecting all of it -- and therefore all of us -- into a global Web of commercial and social relationships.

Now, I could go on talking about the technology or about policy and I will do that briefly.

But let's never lose sight of the fact that, when we talk about access and information and people connected all over the country, what we are really talking about is empowering the individual and the community.

That's the real story of the Internet; not the latest IPO.

People who are comfortable with the technology and who can maneuver through the World Wide Web gain all sorts of power -- as consumers, as employees, as citizens, and as communities of interest.

Who would have believed -- even five years ago -- that one day you'd be able to walk into an automobile dealership with at least as much information as the sales staff?

Any consumer can now get on the Net, compare prices across a whole universe of suppliers, and purchase goods and services.

That means there's no such thing as a captive marketplace anymore, and that should be great news for people in the inner city and rural communities -- but only if they have access to the Net.

A few years ago, if you were dissatisfied with the way a company had treated you, the strongest step you could have taken, short of legal action, would have been a letter to the Better Business Bureau.

Now you can get it off your chest on the World Wide Web and communicate it to thousands -- perhaps tens of thousand -- of people all over the world.

That's how the Web lets the individual stand up to a large institution, and don't think for a minute that business doesn't care about that.

Even more important, the Net lets any small business anywhere connect to millions all over the world. Talk about thinking big . . . the Internet can put a global marketplace at your doorstep and your community on the map.

 The Internet's access to information and advanced communication empowers all of us with more responsibility on the job, more flexibility to choose where and when we work, and more authority to respond to the marketplace.

All that adds up to more satisfaction on the job and a better balance between work and home, and that too is very, very powerful.

With more and more government services becoming available online, technology is empowering the citizen as well. The time may even come when we'll register to vote online.

The World Wide Web's potential for further democratizing society and amplifying the voices of those who are less well off is truly colossal.

Even today, the average citizen is only a few "clicks" away from legislative and regulatory information that was once the private purview of the Beltway insider.

Now it's everyone's. And you can get it without paying thousands of dollars to retain a Washington law firm.

That's real power for a minority community whose interests can be profoundly affected by laws and regulations formulated, not just here in Washington, but at the state and local levels as well.

Empowerment is the real story behind information technology and the Internet, not the incredible market capitalization of all the "dot coms."

The Net liberates people from time, from drudgery, and from bureaucracy.

Not people in isolation from each other, but together in communities.

Communities of interest are forming everywhere in cyberspace to pursue common goals.

All over the developed and developing worlds, universities are going online establishing academic communities.

Here in Washington, in a project called GEN-NET, students in northeast DC receive remote tutoring and help with home work from senior citizens in another part of town.   They're linked together by the Web in a community that promises caring and help for the student, and an opportunity for the senior to play a constructive role in another's life.

There are Web sites even now that connect children nationwide who are in treatment for cancer, so they can share experiences and support each other.

People wishing to adopt a child can now find all sorts of information on the adoption agency Web sites.

Increasingly, we seem to have begun a technology-based transformation of historic proportions, the kind that comes perhaps once in a generation or more.

Information technology today is about where the electric motor and the light bulb were in the nineteenth century. All its potential for transforming business and society at large lies before it.

In fact, as we approach the new millennium, that matrix of interconnected computers, devices, and software known as the "information infrastructure" is likely to influence us and our communities far more than electricity, more even than all preceding technologies.

Imagine a world in which millions and millions of people use the Internet for real-time electronic meetings, to obtain the day's news, or execute secure financial transactions.

It's a world in which lifelong learning will be available online -- whether you want vocational training or an MBA, a high school diploma or a Ph.D.

Medical specialists will examine and even treat patients hundreds or thousands of miles away in rural communities, and devise vaccines matched to the patient's unique chemistry.

Companies and their suppliers will be completely integrated, and the resulting efficiencies will mean lower prices for customers everywhere.

Manufacturers will design everything from aircraft and autos to consumer appliances and fashions using sophisticated computer simulations.

When your workplace is anywhere that offers a connection to the Internet . . . your home, your car, even your cell phone . . . young people may no longer feel pressured to leave their communities to find employment.

And in the coming millennium, "intelligent" IT systems will guide citizens to precisely the government information or services they need.

Believe it or not, information technology will make "bureaucracy" just another word in the dictionary.

This is not a vision just for Wall Street, or the Fortune 1,000, or the great American research universities.

It's a vision for North Philadelphia, for Southside Chicago, and for the reservation in the Dakotas -- in short, for everyone who wants to claim or contribute to the American dream.

Transforming society means all of society, not just a fortunate few.

Everything I've talked about . . . from millions of people connected and communicating . . . to physicians treating patients thousands of miles away . . . to lifelong education . . . is technically feasible.

However, this positive vision for the 21st century will not become reality by itself. It will take thoughtful leadership, hard work and wise policy to come to grips with all the technical, economic and social issues involved.

As many of you know, in a report to the President, our committee proposed a significant increase in government support of IT research. We proposed technical research including:

- Research into software to support our heavy and growing dependence on large, complex, critical software programs.

- Research on networks like the Internet, so we'll know how to build these large, complex systems, and make them as secure and reliable as possible.

- And third, research on extremely fast computing systems that can forecast climate, do advanced manufacturing design, and support research in myriad other areas.

But as our committee formulated its recommendations, we never lost sight of this fact: information technology doesn't exist in a vacuum; it exists to support society's institutions and the people that those institutions serve.

And, if history teaches anything about technology-based transformations, it is that they are not without problems. Even the good effects can have unintended consequences.

That's why -- in addition to calling for significant increases for research into the technology itself, we also recommended that government commit to studying its effects on all of us -- on how we live, learn and earn our daily bread.

Specifically, we recommended expanded initiatives to increase IT-literacy, education and access, and greater funding for research into socio-economic and policy issues arising from the integration of IT into all our institutions.

As we examine today how the coming transformation will affect our respective constituencies, we are in a way taking the first step in that process of socio-economic research.

Clearly, we are at a fork in the road.

One fork leads to one more division -- this time digital -- between the haves and have-nots.

The other can lead us all to a stronger, more unified nation, one that supports vibrant communities and empowered individuals all across our land.

Fortunately -- and unlike past technology-based transformations -- we are capable of ensuring that all who wish it will have the opportunity to benefit in our emerging information society.

We must do the right thing and leave no one behind.

Everyone must have the opportunity to benefit from the profound, empowering transformation that is in process even now.

All the members of the President's committee look forward to drawing on your vast knowledge and experience, so that the advice we provide the Administration and Congress will be humane as well as scientific . . . and so that we can all work together to help close the digital divide.

Thank you very much.