

## Democracy digitized: A national information infrastructure is essential

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# Democracy digitized

## A national information infrastructure is essential

By Jorge Reina Schement -- Broadcasting & Cable, 4/8/2001 8:00:00 PM

Must we carry the liabilities of partisanship into the Information Age? When a new administration arrives full of certainty and conviction, as they all do, there exists the danger that an agenda embraced by the outgoing crowd will be cast aside merely because it belonged to them. When this happens, as it is happening right now at the Federal Communications Commission, Americans may lose more than old political labels; they may also lose national assets.

In a February *New York Times* article, new FCC Chairman Michael Powell expressed his reservations regarding the phrase "digital divide" as a description of the existing gaps in access to information services and technologies.

After expressing commitment to "eliminate barriers," he further responded to reporters' questions concerning the divide, "I think there is a 'Mercedes divide,'" he said. " 'I'd like to have one; I can't afford one.' I'm not meaning to be completely flip about this. I think it's an important social issue. But it shouldn't be used to justify the notion of essentially the socialization of the deployment of the infrastructure."

Powell is right; no one deserves to have a Mercedes just because he or she is an American. And that might even be socialism, though a kind never before experienced on this earth. Nevertheless, by construing the digital-divide agenda as an attempt to distribute undeserving handouts, Powell misses its value as a strategy aimed at broadening access to the essential process of an Information Age democracy.

Powell is right again: His FCC should eliminate barriers to democratic participation. And we should all commend him for forthrightness. Indeed, the existence of information gaps should come as no surprise to anyone in public policy.

As a basic assumption, most policy makers understand that access to information and communications technologies is the primary policy tool for enabling all citizens to participate in economic, political and social activities fundamental to an Information Age democracy that is also a good society.

In this historic moment, as the Information Age begins to gel, an accessible national information infrastructure (NII) is the essential ingredient for overcoming social fragmentation and enabling political participation.

In the 21st century, communication creates society, and, in essence, the NII creates the weave that holds us all together. Hence, when Americans observe or imagine that some are falling

behind, it gives pause because it endangers the promise of democracy—thus our legitimate anxiety over gaps, especially information gaps.

Yet Powell's reference to Mercedes indicates that he might suspect these "gaps" to be fabrications of some Democratic Party publicist. If so, he should dig a little deeper.

A decade of research has documented the existence and persistence of three critical gaps in access.

About 18 million Americans lack telephones in their homes. They are a mixed group. A similar gap appears to exist for Internet access. Some 4,500 schools and 500 public libraries still lack Internet access.

By acknowledging that information access gaps hinder participation in an Information Age democracy, Mr. Powell will bring a public ideal to the FCC in the finest tradition of American governance. And he himself will move toward gaining a better understanding of the FCC's role in promoting the public interest.

In the Information Age, we must recognize information gaps that threaten access, understand them and decide how best to close them. If we do so, we will breathe life into the economic, political and social life of a democratic society that embraces all.