

Competing Visions: The Social Impact of Information and Communications Technology

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The new century promises to be a roller coaster ride fueled by rapidly changing information and communications technologies (ICTs). With the capacity for the almost instant transfer of digital information across the planet, commonly held notions of distance and speed, as well as our understanding of the nature and meaning of interpersonal contact are being challenged and possibly redefined. With redefinition, some believe that the very structural underpinnings of society will be transformed.

Good or bad, it is hard to predict just what will be the eventual political, social and cultural impact of the global interconnectedness made possible by new technologies. In an attempt to explore the possibilities, scholars, researchers and activists from around the world were invited to share their thoughts at a conference for Canadian cultural and information policy makers held in London, Ontario in October, 1999. The conference, "Citizens at the Crossroads. Whose Information Society?," was sponsored by the Government of Canada's Department of Canadian Heritage and the Canadian International Development Agency and hosted by the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at The University of Western Ontario.

The edited collection in this book represents some of the excellent papers read at the conference. Each article reflects its author's vision of the future, visions that range from the enthusiastic and hopeful to the pessimistic and fearful, each outlook supported by rea-

sonable evidence and good arguments. Our purpose in bringing these papers together here is twofold: (1) to alert readers to what might be ahead in the new information society and (2) to serve as a guide in unraveling the public policy implications of the changes wrought by ICTs.

As a guide to what may lie ahead, the authors in this volume have tackled the problem of citizenship and participation in the information age from a number of angles. To assist the reader, we've divided the papers into four sections. The first deals with the broad issues of the information society. Here are papers addressing the historical, political and social implications of developments in information technology. The second section includes papers dealing with questions of censorship and the threat of the extremist right. In the third section, questions of ownership and control of information are discussed. In the final section, the papers are concerned with the role of citizens as participants and decision-makers in the information society.

1. Perspectives on the Information Society

In the lead paper, Peter Golding discusses recent developments in ICTs in the context of sociological theory. He questions whether the changes wrought by ICTs are really as fundamental as many proclaim, pointing, for example, to the "persistent if variable role of the nation-state boundary in human experience