
Preface

This book builds on prior research that all of the authors have done on different aspects of Internet use and public policy. This technology is being used by individuals to improve their lives in many ways, but we have been most interested in policy-relevant issues such as its use for economic opportunity and political participation.

We see this work as distinctly different from our collective past efforts, however, as well as other prior research. First, we recognize the benefits that society might enjoy from Internet use, but we are most concerned with viewing the issue in terms of the opportunities and rights of citizenship, and whether individuals have the capacity to participate fully in society. Drawing on sociologist T. H. Marshall, we explore the ways in which the capabilities needed for membership in society have been altered in the information age. We develop a theoretically grounded argument moving beyond economic efficiency and the availability of new technology by turning to the work of Rogers Smith and Rodney Hero, who define three traditions of citizenship in the United States: liberalism, civic republicanism, and ascriptive hierarchy. We focus on political and economic participation because of their close association with citizenship in the U.S. context, and describe the individual and collective costs of exclusion from digital citizenship as well as the benefits of inclusion.

The second way in which this research differs from some of our previous efforts is that we are now able to examine the *impact* of the Internet, rather than attitudes and experiences. The uses of the Internet are burgeoning, and currently there is fragmentary evidence of how this matters for policy-relevant concerns such as civic engagement, voting, or economic advancement. More than half of U.S. Internet users go online at work, and online news and political Web sites have helped to shape events in the past several elections. We offer evidence of the benefits of

Internet use in the political and economic arenas; and conversely, the costs of exclusion from society online.

Digital citizenship requires educational competencies as well as technology access and skills; and problems such as poverty, illiteracy, and unequal educational opportunities prevent more people from full participation online and in society more generally. Technology inequality is part of the larger fabric of social inequality in the United States.

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