Introduction

The economic, political and social events of the 1990s have dramatically transformed the world. Industrial changes have been brought about by the convergence of technologies, corporate downsizing, megadeals between entertainment and technology businesses, the literal explosion of the Internet, and the fascination with multimedia devices. Unfortunately, there has also been more social unrest and social fragmentation.

The end of the Cold War prompted critical questions about the role of government in U.S. society, questions that come in the midst of one of the country’s most dramatic political swings, with the victories by the Republican party during the 1994 elections. Considerable debate has ensued about the direction of our democratic form of government. Over the last century, the power of the political party has waned considerably, and ticket-splitting has become commonplace. In 1992, for the first time since Theodore Roosevelt ran as the Bull Moose party candidate, a third-party Presidential candidate, H. Ross Perot, garnered more than 15 percent of the popular vote. Political participation, as evidenced by voter turnout, has consistently declined during the century until flattening out in the 1990s.

These changes have been concomitant with the development of communications technologies whose technical sophistication and power have increased in a geometric progression. Sped by these technological advances, Americans have
traveled from farm to city to global village in a century. The changes that have occurred along the way, however, have not been slow and steady, but have occurred at an increasingly accelerated rate.

After the Second Industrial Revolution, innovation and technological diffusion slowly became dominated by large corporations, an ever-growing federal government and a handful of educational institutions. Industries ranging from radio to the railroad were established and maintained and their markets controlled by large institutions through some form of government collaboration. Much of the collaboration was codified through legislation, requiring companies to have a license to operate and to operate “in the public interest.”

Because there were so few producers of technology, the process of innovation was deliberate and controlled. Social change, as a result of technology’s push, came slowly. The automobile was mass produced by Henry Ford in the second decade of this century, but it was not until the 1950s that we began to see its impact with the creation of the mammoth interstate highway system, the development of suburbia and the deterioration of the inner cities.

The new information technologies, on the other hand, move into the market and are rapidly diffused, often without the controls of these powerful institutions. Deregulation is occurring in the majority of marketplaces throughout the globe. Even those areas that retain some degree of regulation, such as broadcasting, are being besieged by market pressures to open up.

More than 180 million computers are in use today. None of their makers or users need a license to operate them, nor do the millions of fax machine users or Internet users need permission to send a fax, “surf the Net” or create a newsgroup. The technology affecting the variety and forms of communication changes so rapidly that the Federal Communications Commission is having enormous difficulty keeping up with, let alone controlling, the best methods for governing information dissemination. Fifteen years ago, few prognosticators could have envisioned the explosive growth of the Internet, the ability to view movies on demand, consumer home shopping via television and the proliferation of cellular phones.

Where will all this head? How will the technology affect the future of democracy in our society? We propose that the answers may be found in examining the “frontier hypothesis” proposed by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893, and applying the tenets of his hypothesis to the “electronic frontier.”

The Frontier Hypothesis

Few academics have had an impact on a field of study at such a young age as did historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner was thirty-one when he delivered a paper entitled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” to a meeting of historians at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in July 1893. While the original presentation met with a tepid response (Kyff, 1993), Turner’s “frontier thesis” was to represent a paradigm shift in the scholarship regarding the historical development of the United States’ national identity.