

*On January 2, 1994, the National Information Infrastructure Task Force came to the University of Southern California to address the issue of universal service. Spokespeople from Pacific Bell rambled on for hours about what they were doing in this area. Professor Tracy Westen, of the Center for Government Studies, also spoke at some length to a panel that notably included Larry Irving, then the Clinton Administration's point person on such issues. During the afternoon session, as panelists and audience alike were nodding off, I was given 2 minutes to speak and managed to get part of this presentation out to an audience that was paying absolutely no attention.*

## **Address to the Universal Service Conference at the University of Southern California, January 2, 1994**

My name is Marc Strassman. I'm the President of Transmedia Communications, a network content provider. I'm also a candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives from the 27th District of California, which includes Burbank, Glendale, Pasadena, and the Foothill Communities to the North. The centerpiece of my campaign is a promise to give the 27th District a new identity as Pacific Hills, a cybercommunity on the order of Singapore and Northern California's Smart Valley, where **every** household is connected through broadband links to all the electronic and economic resources promised by the Information Superhighway. This connection must extend to every household, so that the benefits and responsibilities of civic and commercial life will belong to everyone in Pacific Hills.

Some here today have already and others will continue to make the case for universal service. I applaud and support their efforts. But I want to focus on a special application that requires universal service and will be of particular importance for our future. After the system is up and running, after everyone has shopped electronically until they drop, interacted with every imaginable hedgehog, plumber, or race course, studied Greek mythology, macroeconomics, and Sanskrit at the Virtual University, and finished a hard day or night's or afternoon's work telecommuting or teleputing or whatever we call it, what will be left to do with this terrific tool/toy?

There's a hint in the Report of the National Information Infrastructure Task Force. The Net, says the report, can be used to "access government services" more easily. Indeed it can; indeed it should. From filing income tax returns electronically, to getting social security payments deposited automatically. Also, citizens will be able to use this system to access information that the government has generated and holds: materials in the Library of Congress, census data, etc. And the information won't only go one way: the President, the Vice-President and a few forward-looking members of Congress have already made themselves available for input on the Internet.

But I'm talking about electronic democracy, where these tools are used to create a system where the citizen-voter-netusers directly make decisions over the network.

In the 18th century, people and individuals traveled no faster than they had in Roman times: at horse speed. One of the reasons our Constitution provides for representative, rather than direct, democracy, is that it wasn't possible to get everyone together in one place in 1789. Representatives of the people met in Philadelphia and created a government form that replicated the representative nature of their own conclave.

With modern digital communications, everyone can be in one place at once. Everyone can express his or her view and it can be seen, read, or heard by millions of other people instantaneously. This idea is not new. In the late 40's Buckminster Fuller pointed out that with television and telephones it was already theoretically possible to have direct electronic democracy. Forty-five years later, CNN and C-SPAN put the deliberations and the pronouncements of our political leaders onto our screens as they happen. The House of Representatives now votes by electronic device. Millions of citizen vote for fat Elvis or thin Elvis stamps via 900- numbers set up by tabloid tv shows. Why can't the members of Congress vote from their home districts while watching the debate on C-SPAN? Why can't they participate in the debate from their home districts, or any other place in the world, through video teleconferencing? Why can't constituents throughout a congressional district participate in digitally-mediated town halls and instruct their representative on how to cast his or her vote on the Virtual House Floor? Why can't the people vote on the issues before the country directly?

These are some of the issues raised by the advent of technologies that make electronic democracy possible. Whether debates open to all and votes involving the entire electorate will give us better government than we have no is not immediately obvious. What should be obvious is that the more developed these communications technologies become, the more feasible such arrangements will be. In light of the high-stakes and on-going struggle among the cable companies, phone companies, cable-phone companies, etc., for control of the Information Superhighway, it is crucial that we continue to consider the possibilities for and the implications of, this highway as the backbone and forum for our own self-government. Because if we end up using it this way, and in some senses we almost certainly will, as a means of deciding who owns what and who gets to behave how, then we really have to be aware that whoever owns, operates, or controls the Information superhighway is going to be very interested in how it is used to decide issues of ownership, operation, and control of that system, which, to the extent that the Information Superhighway becomes the linchpin and key to our economy, culture, and politics, will be tantamount to deciding who owns, operates, and controls the world and the lives we live within it.

These are important issues, and I thank you for giving me a chance to comment upon them here today. Please continue your very important and welcome efforts in a crucial area that concerns us all.