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*The Internet Changes Everything: Revolutionizing Public Participation and Access to Government Information Through the Internet*

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Abstract by Meredyth S. Cooper

This article discusses the trend of government use of electronic technology and the ensuing benefits that can result from administrative agency use of the Internet, including increased citizen access and public participation. The recognition of electronic technology as an invaluable mechanism for communication between the government and public was embodied in the Electronic Freedom of Information Act (E-FOIA) Amendments of 1996. The E-FOIA Amendments included provisions seeking to increase agency use of technology by redefining the term “record” to include electronic information and requiring agencies to comply with the format requested by individuals seeking information under the Freedom of Information Act, if readily reproducible in that format.

The author also examines potential limitations of Internet use by agencies, such as unequal access for those without computer access and the tangible threats to personal privacy by requiring agencies to post certain information on the Internet. However, the author argues the potential public benefits of increasing public access thereby increasing compliance and participation by using the Internet may outweigh the downsides. Electronic technology would also encourage agencies to utilize formal notice and comment procedures, in lieu of informal processes that were becoming more frequently employed. The Internet provides a forum for more citizens and interested parties to participate in the development stages of the formal rulemaking process, thereby reducing potential future litigation after enactment, and thus providing an incentive for agencies to utilize formal procedures.

