In a large, airy room there is a crowd of young people and adults all working at computers. In one group students are having their first experience using a spreadsheet on an IBM PS/1. At the same time, in another corner, a senior adult is teaching herself to use a database on an IBM PC. A young man is updating the church’s membership files and printing mailing labels. A young woman is at the Macintosh working on a desktop publishing project, and two teenagers are in another corner debating how best to make the Logo Turtle do what they want it to do. Others are casually ‘messing about’ with simulations. They are all using these technologies to achieve their own personal goals and objectives.1

This description of an open public access session at the Playing to Win (PTW) Harlem Community Computing Center in the late 1980s contains a vision that extends far beyond technology access and education in a single storefront setting—for PTW was one of the country’s earliest examples of a technology education and access program established in a non-school community center, specifically for people of low-income and low literacy. It gave birth to what has become the Community Technology Centers’ Network (CTCNet), a nationwide support project and membership association of more than 300 community organizations establishing similar technology education and access programs for disenfranchised communities or some special subset of its members. And PTW did this by embodying and making explicit a vision of democratic education around technology that is transformative and liberating for individuals, organizations, communities, and society at its best, one that is applicable to the community technology movement in general and to the wider and broader struggle for democracy and social change.
An Overview of Community Technology in the United States at the Turn of the Millennium

A brief sketch of the community technology movement in the United States today will help serve as a vantage point from which to view its origins historically and philosophically, and uncover some of its democratic educational and political foundations and orientations.

The community technology movement in America is a diverse and multidimensional family of efforts, practical and intellectual, each of which originated under particular technological, political, and historical circumstances, but are more and more frequently brought closer and closer together through a convergence of technologies and public policies that shape their development and distribution. Thanks to the deregulatory policies of the 1996 Telecommunications Act and the trend in digital technologies to merge previously distinct services such as cable and telephone, corporate developers are busy forming huge new corporations across the now outmoded regulatory, technology, and sectoral divisions. Along with these mergers, a convergence of public interest power is also taking place among those who have begun to build new linkages across these no-longer-distinct lines.

As the executive directors of CTCNet, the Association for Community Networking (AFCN), and the Alliance for Community Media (ACM) wrote in their recent introduction to the jointly produced Community Technology Review focusing on telecommunications policy:

Our distinct organizations and individual constituents may focus on different technologies, but ...[t]he astounding emergence of new technologies in recent years and the complex policy environment which has resulted represent both a threat to and an opportunity for our efforts to ensure that the benefits of the digital society are available to all. ... [W]e represent centers and institutions dedicated with real resources and skills to help people defend their basic rights to economic opportunity, educational parity, health and safety, and democratic participation through technology and media. And this rapidly changing and complex environment represents an opportunity for us to collaborate in new ways, and has created new points of entry into policy processes for new kinds of constituencies. While corporate entities seem to increasingly control the process, there is also increasing interest in supporting and promoting telecommunications in the public interest. ...And the technology itself affords an unprecedented opportunity to level the playing field and allow previously unheard voices to be heard.2

Thus here is one place where three different organizational strands have been united by the convergence in technology and public policy—community technology centers and community networking projects, which grew independently from the mid-1980s, and community cable television, which originated two decades earlier. As a community technology center-oriented project, CTCNet is joined by a number of related specialized programs, including those of SeniorNet, the Alliance for Technology Access and its network of centers and partnerships targeted specifically
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