3. E-PARTICIPATION

**Basic format(s):** Electronic, Internet-based
  E-mail, Web page, electronic survey, news or discussion group

**Purpose:** Low-cost, flexible ability to access citizens

**Uses:** Information exchange, discussion, dialogue, survey

**Duration:** Variable

**Participants:** 2 to ?
**Key factors:** These techniques require that the individual have access to and the ability to use a computer and work on-line. Some specific techniques are:

- *provision of information and data* — an informing function
- *e-mail* — a personal approach to information exchange, single or multiple addresses
- *Web site* — ability to provide downloadable materials such as discussion papers, draft plans, option papers, and get immediate on-line feedback with e-survey
- *bulletin board* — information posted on a specific topic, etc.
- *discussion group* — monitored and led by a responsible and experienced on-line facilitator; can be open or limited numbers; access can be controlled by password
- *virtual community* — establish a limited-access discussion group for a specific topic, issue, sector, geographic area; stakeholders can talk directly to other stakeholders.

Stakeholder-group representatives taking part on an advisory committee could use any of these means to exchange information with their constituents to ensure that they are current with discussions and process flow.

E-techniques have the potential to provide a wide range of information in varying detail through hot links and hyperlinks. They are flexible, meeting diverse needs, including language, limited time, potential for knowledge management and capacity-building.

The third level of possible change in our lives — the political, derives from the middle social level, for politics is always a combination of communications and physical power. The role of communications media among the citizenry is particularly important in the politics of democratic societies. The idea of modern representative democracy as it was first conceived by enlightenment philosophers included a recognition of a living web of citizen-to-citizen communications known as civil society or the public sphere. Although elections are the most visible fundamental characteristics of democratic societies, those elections are assumed to be supported by discussions among citizens at all levels of society about issues of importance to the nation.

If a government is to rule according to the consent of the governed, the effectiveness of that government is heavily influenced by how much the governed know about the issues that affect them. The mass-media dominated public sphere is where the governed get knowledge; the problem is that commercial mass media, led by broadcast television, have polluted with flashy, phony, often violent imagery a public sphere that once included a large component of reading, writing and rational discourse ... substituting slick public relations for genuine debate and packaging both issues and candidates like other consumer products.
The political significance of CMC (computer mediated communication) lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy’s monopoly on powerful communications media and perhaps thus revitalizing citizen-based democracy ... The way the number of owners or telecommunication channels is narrowing to a tiny elite, while the reach and power of the media they own expand, is a converging threat to citizens ...

(Rheingold, 1993, p. 13-14)