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## **NEW STUDY SHOWS IMPORTANCE OF THE INTERNET IN COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR**

New research shows that the internet is an important tool in the community and voluntary sector in New Zealand. It provides a link to support structures and access to resources for individuals and community groups. The study, undertaken by Andy Williamson as part of his PhD research into community-led electronic democracy, shows that the internet plays an important role in facilitating community engagement within civil society and between civil society and government agencies.

New Zealand has a relatively high level of internet usage. The research shows that individuals who have internet access use it innovatively and successfully to communicate, research, resource, engage and promote community outcomes. This is happening within existing groups and amongst wider geographically dispersed communities of interest.

There was a strong affirmation of the potential value of electronic democracy (eDemocracy). However, concern was expressed that eDemocracy projects must avoid becoming elitist and need to be closely linked to the communities that they serve. The internet's potential to enhance active participation emerged as a key theme. The research shows that the internet has the potential to make the democratic process more available, accountable and transparent for citizens.

The internet assists citizens to be more informed, improves access to information and allows individuals to publish alternative viewpoints. It is perceived as increasing the ability to influence decision makers.

The study identified immediacy of access as an important factor affecting the use of computers. Individuals who lack immediate access, particularly at home or at work, are less likely to incorporate new technologies into their activities. This suggests an access deficit, where lack of access means you are less likely to see the potential and less able to realise the benefits on offer from technologies such as the internet. It highlights a risk that some sectors of society will be left further behind as the digital age advances.

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Page 1 of 2

[END]

For more information on the above study and for a detailed discussion of these initial findings, please visit: [www.edemocracy.co.nz](http://www.edemocracy.co.nz) or contact:

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