

There is something deeply symbolic about the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games, with athletes from all nations coming together to share and celebrate being part of one world. In one time, in one place, the world seems smaller, friendlier, and more together. It's a unique moment, not to be repeated until the next time the world assembles to come together to watch. Not anymore.



The Olympics are still important, but our society's ability to envision the world has changed through rapidly changing technology. We can all come together immediately, live, in words or pictures, thanks to the power of cell phones, computers, televisions, and cameras. The way we socialize, learn, play, and communicate are constantly improving because of advancing technology.

Rapidly changing technology is giving today's students enormous educational opportunities. Elementary students can not only study about the geography or cultures of people living across the planet, they can video-chat with a classroom of students across the globe in real-time. Middle school students and high school students use online discussion boards, textbooks, and class websites to post homework, download assignments, and interact with their teachers. This technology can also give new opportunities to today's students that no previous generations of students had, because now PREK-12 students can enroll in online courses, often at their local school, and take classes that would be impossible to offer in many small communities. Whether it's a foreign language, obscure science, interesting elective, or advanced course that would not run in a small school-environment, 1.75 million PREK-12 students took online courses last year, and that number is expected to rapidly increase to 10.5 million by 2014. This also helps students transition to college, where now 1 in 5 college students take courses online.

But being familiar with social networking, cell phones, video games, and all other forms of emerging technologies have other self-reported impacts. Students today are more equipped to handle the quickly-evolving technological world and they report being more open to diversity. We socialize differently because of modern technology. While it is difficult to find reliable statistics on the success of online dating, many Americans successfully find partners directly or indirectly through online communication, whether it's through a social network or through an online dating service. The social benefits of technology are almost never-ending. One can find potential friends with similar interests, post to existing friends their plans and feelings on topics, view the schedules of their other friends, and read about the trials and tribulations of the social lives of everyone they know—by glancing at a screen or two of a computer or cell phone. The days of making numerous phone calls or opening and sending dozens (or hundreds) of emails are now over. More importantly, by bringing together so many people, it is hard to imagine that anyone can feel alone. Everyone can find a group to belong to online, one that will share his or her beliefs and listen to his or her thoughts. People who previously felt lonely or isolated from their community can now be a part of a community online that will welcome them and celebrate their thoughts or ideas.

In addition to the educational value, communities are being served through enhanced ability for people to see events in their community to better comprehend their world. In January 2009, when a US Airways passenger plane made a "miracle" emergency landing in the Hudson River, people began tweeting about the plane crashing four minutes after it occurred, and a rescue-ferry worker snapped a picture of the plane in the water almost 15 minutes before a national news broadcast aired with the plane-emergency landing story. This followed a December 2008 Continental incident in Denver where a jet slid off a runway and burst into flames and a man tweeted about the experience immediately, which instantly created fame for both the man—and Twitter, and hailed Twitter as a breaking-news mechanism where eyewitnesses to events report their information to the world to become, in essence, a part of a community of reporters.

The trend of relying on ordinary people and their emerging technology has shaped modern journalism. Whether it's local broadcast channels or community newspapers, the rise of "citizen journalism" allows and encourages ordinary community members to use modern technology—emails, digital photography, cell phone snapshots, text messages—to report breaking news events and share their findings with the newspapers, online newspapers, or broadcast channels. In this way, ordinary citizens can share their photos or text messages of breaking news, or their thoughts about events going on in the news with the public as a whole. Technology serves the greater good and helps make the community stronger and more connected.