

New York City Goes Wireless

by Laura Forlano

Thursday, August 01, 2002 12:00 AM

Â

Bryant Park is Manhattan's newest Internet cafe, and it is only the most recent addition to a growing list of free places to surf the Net in New York City. Currently, there are 70 "hotspots" including bars, street corners, parks and other public spaces in Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx where New Yorkers can get online. Check the map by [NYCwireless](#), a volunteer community group of computer wizards that is partnering with [Bryant Park Restoration Corporation](#) and other public organizations, as well as sponsors like Intel, to build these access points.

New Yorkers thrive on mobility, and this now includes the ability to socialize and conduct business while on the move. We have seen the way that cell phones have transformed our conversations and our schedules, which is why one of the first questions typically asked on the phone now is: Where are you?

Now, add the potential to write wireless e-mail and download Web sites and data from your local park using a variety of small portable devices. According to research by New York University's [Taub Urban Research Center](#) supported by the National Science Foundation, wireless technologies will have an inevitably greater impact on our lives than the deskbound Internet. With wireless access, our parks could be turned into giant chatrooms or boardrooms.

The wireless network in Bryant Park--which uses radio waves to transmit data to a wireless network card in your laptop--can support 500 users writing e-mails and downloading Internet pages. However, heavy use such as downloading audio or video files could slow down the network. The system uses T1 (high-speed Internet) lines and costs \$10,000 to install and \$1,000 per month to maintain.

In order to use the Internet from the park, you need a laptop computer and a wireless access card, a card that slides into your computer and communicates with the wireless network. Other small portable devices in addition to laptops such as personal digital assistants and Blackberry's can also be connected to the Internet using wireless networks.

Unlike the rest of the amenities in the park, of course, this is not open to every New Yorker; you still need a laptop. The wireless networks have not crossed the digital divide.

New York City Goes Wireless

by Laura Forlano

Thursday, August 01, 2002 12:00 AM

But it is a start — and according to Anthony Townsend of the Taub Center, an important one. "Unwiring our cities will be as important as electrification was at the end of the 19th century," he says. "Cities that provide this amenity will thrive. Others will just get left behind. "

And, government can benefit from the ability to deliver timely, personal and useful information and services. For example, citizens could access emergency or traffic information instantly or send instant messages to report broken parking meters or dangerous situations. In addition, e-government services targeted at education, health and housing could be accessed anywhere.

Currently, New York's free, high-speed wireless network is limited to 70 hotspots. However, the hope is that as these networks are connected together, all of New York City could be linked wirelessly. Of course, some nodes in the network will not be free as private sector service providers charge fees for a certain type or quality of service.

Strong action is needed by government to ensure that wireless access becomes embedded in the fabric of New York. Just as the city maintains air quality, drinking water and public parks, wireless networks may be the public utility of the future. And indeed, citizens will come to expect wireless access to government information and services.

Laura Forlano is a doctoral student studying communication technology policy at Columbia University.