Robert D. Carlitz

Majored in physics at Duke University and in graduate school at the California Institute for Technology; received a PhD in 1970. For the following two decades did research in theoretical physics while teaching, first at the University of Chicago and then at the University of Pittsburgh. This research focused on the strong interactions of elementary particles and the nature of their component parts (quarks and gluons). The period of the 1970’s and 1980’s was one in which the “Standard Model” of particle physics was proposed and largely confirmed by experiment. As such, it was a time of unusual intellectual ferment and scientific progress.

As particle physicists and others began to adopt the Internet as a means of communication, I became interested in its broader social applications. In particular, I was excited by a technology that could inexpensively connect everyone in the world, with interactions mediated through communities of interest. In 1989 I helped found the KIDSNET (later KIDSPHERE) Internet mailing list, which evolved into a forum that coordinated new activities in school networking. This led me to develop a project that networked the Pittsburgh Public Schools, which was supported by the National Science Foundation as a testbed for school networking.

Further work extended the public infrastructure in Pittsburgh to provide Internet access at community sites. The nonprofit Information Renaissance was founded in 1996 to coordinate these blossoming activities. Our focus is on public sector Internet – access and usage. 1996 was the year in which Congress rewrote telecommunications law, establishing subsidies to link schools and libraries to the Internet. Seeing that almost no local school districts were participating in the Federal Communications Commission’s rulemaking on this topic, Information Renaissance developed an electronic docket and used it to conduct a national online dialogue on this program. This was the first of a number of participative online efforts that we have carried out.

Current interests at Information Renaissance are in two areas – networking infrastructure, particularly as implemented with fixed wireless technologies, and public participation in rulemaking and related processes.