Federal policy and the future of computer communications services

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Communications policy has long been a matter of direct Federal concern, based on the government’s responsibility to regulate the monopoly communications industry. As computer technology becomes increasingly reliant on communications services, and as computers become increasingly utilized in the provision of communications services, the Federal government is faced with difficult policy decisions in executing its mandate to regulate communications services while at the same time refraining from regulation and inhibition of developments in computer systems.

In the intersection of the computer and communications industries, there are major new markets emerging for data communications services as well as hardware which arguably has both data processing and communications functions. Equally important, other regulated services which have traditionally been provided in paper media, such as postal service and banking, are now shifting to electronic form as electronic mail and electronic fund transfers. The technological possibility of all digital networks, in which a wide variety of services including voice could be distributed in digital form under computer control, further complicates the problem of regulating monopoly communications carriers while at the same time maintaining a competitive free enterprise market in the nonregulated data processing field.

Incoming Federal Communications Commission (FCC) chairman, Charles D. Ferris, while affirming the FCC pro-competitive posture toward the provision of certain communications services has recognized the scope of the new technological opportunities. Ferris was recently quoted in the Washington Post as saying “I don’t think its Buck Rogers to conceive of a system in the very near future of homes and certainly businesses having not only voice communications with each other but access to data banks, even video communications” and citing the possibility of computer terminals in each home and business for transactions ranging from banking to ordering groceries.

The panel will address the present status of Federal policy, regulation and legislation impinging on computer communications, as well as relevant anticipated developments and their impact on the data processing field.

The discussion will commence with a brief overview of multiple regulatory jurisdictions within the Federal government which affect computer communications in their various forms, including the Federal Communications Commission, the Congress and groups within the Executive Branch. The panel will then focus on the major issues within these forums, beginning with consideration of issues currently addressed by the Executive Branch; of particular importance will be international communications, as well as the newly created office of the Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Communications and Information. Following will be two closely related presentations on regulation of the communications industry, as implemented by the FCC and the Congress. Discussion of the Federal Communications Commission will address the trend toward a pro-competitive policy and the distinction between communications and data processing which is being formulated in the ongoing FCC “Computer Inquiry” (Docket No. 20828). Current issues before the Congress will be discussed as an extension of recent FCC decisions, and particular attention will be given to the possible revision of the Communications Act of 1934 as well as other related legislation dealing with industry structure in the telecommunications field.