Development and management of a national information policy

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Policymakers in the information field have been hollering for concerted action for years. “We need an information policy!”—you could quote leaders in bunches on that one, from the executive and legislative branches, or from university and corporate settings. In truth, everyone would admit that we have an information policy or, more accurately, many information policies. What we don’t appear to have is agreement on a single set of guiding principles, or even on a common pragmatic approach. This is not more than one might expect from our polyfacetic system, in dealing with an area with such rapid technological change.

Not having a consensus on policy, a preliminary step is to set up some process for arriving at a consensus.

The Information Age Commission bill—sponsored by Senators Sam Nunn (D-GA) and Frank Lautenberg (R-NJ)—was introduced in early 1985. It is not a new bill, nor is the Commission it creates a new idea. The idea of a national discussion of the changes wrought in our society stems from a call for a “Temporary National Information Committee”; akin to the Depression-era Temporary National Economic Committee. Its authors began expressing their concern in the late 1960’s.

How broadly should the mandate of such a Commission range? Prior proposals for a government information function have, I believe, gone in three policy directions:

1. Aimed, alone or predominantly, at international issues.
2. Aimed at one or more narrow policy areas, such as dissemination of scientific and technical information.
3. Spanning the entire range of information policy issues.

The prospect of a very broad mandate raises fears of massive government regulation among some stakeholders; and yet the interrelatedness of information policy issues makes delimiting the mandate of such a group a difficult and perhaps self-defeating task.

And what should such a Commission do? Conduct or contract research, commission papers, conduct hearings and produce hearing transcripts, issue reports? And, if so, to whom should these materials be directed? The bills that just died in Congress leave many of these issues open. Rather than debate these questions here, I will just stipulate that there are a number of groups that already conduct competent information policy research, and that the usual run of reports will generate the same enthusiasm and political action that the reports of other recent Commissions have—little or none.

If we need a Commission on the Information Age—and I’ll add my voice to the chorus and say we do indeed—it should do something different than the usual such group.

What we need is to create a process by which we can reach a consensus. We don’t have to get to a consensus in order to derive benefits from working at it; the process itself clarifies viewpoints, acquaints people with the insights of others, and gets the uninvolved interested. All of these are important things to have happen.

Everyone who has ever wanted to kick their bank’s automatic teller machine, everyone who has their paycheck directly deposited or their house payments directly withdrawn from their bank account, everyone who spends hours at work or at home or in a college in front of a CRT screen and a keyboard—everyone who pays taxes, in fact, since their information can be used in computer-based matches for research, for determination of benefits, for evidence of fraud—is affected by new technology. All of these people are participating in a revolution, and they probably don’t know it. They might have something to say about it if they were made aware.

We need to create a consensus-reaching process. A Commission could do that, if it viewed its mandate as promoting dialogue—as synthesis, summary, and communication. A Commission should not necessarily do research, but might identify issues and opportunities. A Commission could hold hearings and entertain viewpoints from scientists, corporate heads, technicians, and the public at large. A Commission, finally, could report in different ways and at different technical levels to policymakers, to professionals, to the corporate world, and to the public at large.