



Renewing the Commitment To a Public Interest Telecommunications Policy

The Telecommunications Policy Roundtable is a coalition of more than 70 public interest organizations banding together to help steer the direction of the U.S. government's information highway plans. The group's statement of principles (presented here) was issued less than a month after the Clinton administration released its own blueprint for the nation's information highway: "National Information Infrastructure: Agenda for Action," and after the dramatic developments in the telecommunications industry, including the planned merger of Bell Atlantic and Tele-Communications Incorporated (TCI).

Last year ACM established a public policy committee (USACM) to serve as the focal point for ACM's interaction with U.S. government organizations and the public on matters of strategic issues in information technology. Chaired by Barbara Simons, USACM is comprised of roughly 20 select members, chosen for their technical prominence and their expertise in various policy-related areas. This ACM committee has signed its support to the coalition, setting its sights on the creation of new approaches to building our nation's emerging information infrastructure.

A new National Information Infrastructure is rapidly moving into place—which will carry video, audio, and information into homes and offices across the country. Its emergence will produce fundamental shifts in American life, transforming everything from work to education to government to culture. Because the health of our democracy is inextricably linked to the nature of our communications system, this new information infrastructure raises far-reaching questions about our country and its transition into the next century: Who will own these networks? Who will have access to them? What steps will be taken to preserve public institutions?

Policy decisions made during the next few years will shape the communications system for decades to come. Enlightened policies could harness the power of these new technologies to ameliorate many of our nation's most critical problems by revitalizing civic institutions, expanding educa-

tional opportunities, enhancing access to health care services, and improving job training. However, without a clear commitment to public goals, this promise will never be fulfilled. Instead, many of the shortcomings of our present telecommunications system will be intensified and a host of more serious problems created. There is already a growing disparity between the technologically affluent and the technologically disenfranchised that endangers our social fabric.

Policy makers must ensure that the development of the information infrastructure reflects the public interest spirit that has long guided our country's communications policies. Our commitment to a national telephone system available to all gave rise to the concept of "universal service," enabling those in the most remote parts of the nation to have access to this means of communication. Our commitment to making noncommercial educational, arts, and public affairs programming available to all Americans led to the creation of a public broadcasting system.

Our government has the responsibility as public trustee to ensure that new communications technologies serve the democratic and social needs of our country. The rise of new technologies and new businesses has increased the importance of this responsibility. The convergence of once separate industries requires a new policy framework for the information infrastructure, rooted in the shared values of our country and dedicated to the common good.

We call on the president and Congress to pursue a broad and public interest vision for the NII. We must move beyond narrow and short-term interests and embrace a view that reflects the great diversity and richness of our country. Our policies should reflect the values of a democratic government—openness, participation, and discussion. They must be inclusive and generous in spirit, ensuring that all segments of our pluralistic society have meaningful access to the telecommunications system. These are the principles on which a great nation has been built.

As representatives of many non-profit and public interest organiza-

tions, we believe the following principles must guide policy-making in order to ensure that future generations inherit an information infrastructure which enhances the quality of life for everyone.

Public Interest Principles

1. **Universal Access.** All people should have affordable access to the NII.

Fundamental to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in the Infor-

mation Age is access to video, audio, and data networks that provide a broad range of news, public affairs, education, health, and government information and services. Such services should be provided in a user-

Telecommunications Policy Roundtable *List Current Through October 1993*

Alliance for Community Media
Alliance for Public Technology
American Arts Alliance
American Association of Law Libraries
American Civil Liberties Union
American Council of the Blind
American Library Association
Arts Wire
American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
Association of America's Public Television Stations
Association of Research Libraries
The Benton Foundation
Boston Computer Society, Public Service Committee
Center for Civic Networking
Center for Excellence in Education/Advanced Engineering Research & Associates
Center for Media Education
Center for Policy Alternatives
Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility
Computer Researching Association
Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities
Consortium of Social Science Associations
Consumer Federation of America
Coalition for Networked Information
Electronic Frontier Foundation
Gallaudet University
Government Accountability Project
High Performance, an arts magazine
The Information Trust
Institute for Public Representation
Institute for Alternative Journalism

Iris Network for Teachers, an on-line system on the MetalNetwork
The Legacy Project
Libraries for the Future
Lowenstein and Associates
Media Access Project
Medical Library Association
Minority Legislative Education Program
National Alliance of Media Arts and Culture
National Association for the Deaf
National Association of Artists Organizations
National Capitol Area Public Access Network (CapAccess)
National Center for Law and Deafness
National Citizens Communications Lobby
National Coalition on Black Voter Participation
National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History
National Federation of Community Broadcasters
National Learning Foundation
National Security Archive
National Writers Union (Local 1981 UAW)

New York Foundation for the Arts
OMB Watch
People for the American Way
Public Citizen
Public Service Telecommunications Corporation
Seattle Community Network
Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc.
SLONET
Special Libraries Association
Sports Fans United
Taxpayer Assets Project
The Technology Education Council of Somerville (Mass.)
Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc.
Telecommunications Committee, National Association for the Deaf
Telecommunications Section of the Community Development Society
TVFA, Television for All
Telluride Institute/InfoZone
Unison Institute
United Cerebral Palsy Associations, Inc.
U.S. Public Policy Committee of the Association for Computing Machinery
World Institute on Disability
Writers Guild of America, East, Inc.

While participation in the Roundtable is open to all, "members" have formally endorsed the Public Interest Principles. To add your organization's name to this list or for more information, please contact Emily Littleton, coordinator, at

Center for Media Education
1511 K St., Ste. 518
Washington, DC 20005
Voice: 202-628-2620
Fax: 202-628-2554
cme@access.digex.net

friendly format, widely available to everyone, including persons with disabilities. Information that is essential in order to fully participate in a democratic society should be provided free.

2. *Freedom to Communicate.* The NII should enable all people to effectively exercise their fundamental right to communicate.

Freedom of speech should be protected and fostered by the new information infrastructure, guaranteeing the right of every person to communicate easily, affordably, and effectively. The design of the infrastructure should facilitate two-way, audio and video communication from anyone to any individual, group, or network. The rights of creators must be protected, while accommodating the needs of users and libraries. Telecommunication carriers should not be permitted to constrain the free flow of information protected by the First Amendment.

3. *Vital Civic Sector.* The NII must have a vital civic sector at its core.

For our democracy to flourish in the 21st Century, there must be a vital civic sector which enables the meaningful participation of all segments of our pluralistic society. Just as we have established public libraries and public highways, we must cre-

ate public arenas or "electronic commons" in the media landscape. This will require the active involvement of a broad range of civic institutions—schools, universities, libraries, not-for-profit groups, and governmental organizations. It will also require vibrant public telecommunications networks at the national, regional, and state level.

4. *Diverse and Competitive Marketplace.* The NII should ensure competition among ideas and information providers.

The NII must be designed to foster a healthy marketplace of ideas, where a full range of viewpoints is expressed and robust debate is stimulated. Individuals, nonprofits, and for-profit information providers need ready access to this marketplace if it is to thrive. To ensure competition among information providers, policies should be developed to lower barriers to entry (particularly for small and independent services); telecommunications carriers should not be permitted to control programming; and antitrust policies should be vigorously enforced to prevent market dominance by vertically-integrated media monopolies.

5. *Equitable Workplace.* New technologies should be used to enhance the quality of work and to promote

equity in the workplace.

Because the NII will transform the content and conduct of work, policies should be developed to ensure that electronic technologies are utilized to improve the work environment rather than dehumanize it. Workers should share the benefits of the increased productivity that these technologies make possible. The rights and protections that workers now enjoy should be preserved and enhanced. To encourage nondiscriminatory practices throughout the information marketplace, public policy should promote greater representation of women, people of color, and persons with disabilities at all levels of management.

6. *Privacy.* Privacy should be carefully protected and extended.

A comprehensive set of policies should be developed to ensure that the privacy of all people is adequately protected. The collection of personal data should be strictly limited to the minimum necessary to provide specific services. Sharing data collected from individuals should only be permitted with their informed consent, freely given without coercion. Individuals should have the right to inspect and correct data files about them. Innovative billing practices should be developed that increase individual privacy.

7. *Democratic Policy-making.* The public should be fully involved in policy-making for the NII.

The public must be fully involved in all stages of the development and ongoing regulation of the NII. The issues are not narrow technical matters which will only affect us as consumers; they are fundamental questions that will have profound effects on us as citizens and could reshape our democracy. Extensive efforts should be made to fully inform the public about what is at stake, and to encourage broad discussion and debate. The policy process should be conducted in an open manner with full press scrutiny. Effective mechanisms should be established to ensure continued public participation in telecommunications policy-making. 