Theodore D. Sterling (Chairman) Simon Fraser University; John L. Gentile, United States
Postal Service; Robert Kling, University of California; Terry C. Kuch, Vice Chairman, ACM
SIGCAS; Kenneth Laudon, Centre for Policy Research; Daniel McCracken, Author and Consultant
Allen Westin, Columbia University; Anthony Wasserman, University of California.

Computing professionals have been immersed predominantly in problems of how to acquire, formulate, and retrieve information with some vague notion that someone, somewhere, sometime is going to use that information to better frame suitable policy. This assumes of course a rational universe in which strategies are based on outcomes of observations and guided by criteria which optimize something reasonable --such as health, income, production, power, or what have you. We may be waking up now to the realization that the technical problem has a much broader scope than first envisioned. The technical problem may have to also include a demonstration that information can be used to formulate rational policy in the first place and how to do it.

It is true that information is used, sometimes. But there are so many examples of information not entering the formation of public policy that serious questions need to be asked on how public policy is formed. The answer is, of course, that public policy is formed through the workings of a variety of political and social factors in which information plays a relatively small part. Perhaps one of the most awesome examples is furnished by the Russian economy. For years, probably ever since the Revolution, Russians have busily accumulated data about the performance of their economy starting at the production level. This vast amount of information practically remains unused when economic goals are specified. These economic goals are predominantly set through processes of negoation, mixed with coercion, in which management is not above lustily lying about capabilities and performance so as to obtain the most favorable quotas. As a result, specification for performance is set up almost in complete isolation of "reality". Of course, if the Russians sell enough oil or mine enough gold they can then buy steel or automobile plants or food or computers and computer know-how. That we do better in the West is perhaps not so much due to our better use of information on how our economy performs but to relatively favourable conditions created by a relatively free market place. We may make better use of information in setting out our policy goals than do the Russians, but nothing to brag about. Surely after having seen the mighty McNamara stumble like a blind man into Vietnam because he refused to accept information not congruent with administration prejudices, or the Public Health Service (in Canada and the U.S.) ignore information on health hazards, or regulating agencies refuse to explore the problems of the regulated consumers, or the haphazard ways by which monies are made tight or loose depending upon the prejudices of successions of economic theorists, or and so on, how can reasonable people still take seriously the proposition that actual information about the political quality, the economic activity, or the social need forms the basis on which public policy is formed?

Yet, we are in a dilemma here. Public policy (whether it is with respect to the environment, to health, to the economy, or to our political survival) needs to be formulated in a rational way if we are going to count many future generations. The fact that information has played less of a role in the past in setting public policy may have been due to the happy circumstance, noticed first by de Tocqueville, that we are so big and so mighty that we can afford large and splendid mistakes. But the days may be past when we can make mistakes without end or perhaps the mistakes have become so big that no country can tolerate them, not even in North America. Whatever the case may be, we may have to turn toward rational policies based on the best information available in order to survive.

The Panel will act as a group of intellectuals, computer professionals, and political soothsayers. They will explore the interrelationship between three crucial topics:

1. What is the actual role of information in public policy decisions? (with emphasis on the reality and not the appearance)

2. What are the conditions under which information may possibly become useful to decision-makers and provide input for optimal decisions?

3. What are the technical limitations to achieving the ideal?

While the panel members will address themselves to some of these questions in detail, a number of them will make additional amplifications.

T.D.C. Kuch will point out that in industrial nations today the interplay of data, computers, and public policy is highly complex and any reductionist approach is apt to overlook those very aspects which are most central, even if least recognized. Any conceptual model of reality must be tested against an analysis of a real situation.

Hypotheses are offered as a contribution to a theory of the place of data and its manipulation in the formation and execution of public policy; then these will be tested by the analysis of a real situation in which public and private agencies came into conflict, and in which the collection, analysis, and use of data was the apparent central focus of contention. In light of this analysis, the hypothesis will be reformulated, conclusions will be drawn, and an estimate will be given as to the applicability of the particular example to other instances of the use of data in policy making.

*K.C. Laudon will focus primarily on topic two.
His overall point of view is that one cannot
understand the filure or urban information
systems to influence public policy without
understanding the social and political values,
and interests which shape their origins, design,
and utilization. Within this framework the
following observations need to be made:*

1. *With respect to origins, current in-
   formation systems are designed to maxi-
   mize the rationality and efficiency
   of administration of existing social
   programs as opposed to maximizing other
   social values such as justice and equality.*

2. *That current information systems which
   are proliferating at local administrative
   levels of government in the United States
   were never intended by their builders
   (except in public relations campaigns)
   to have much impact on the overall design
   of social policy or the formulation of
   new policies. As it turns out, local
   government administers policies estab-
   lished at the national level.*

3. *That even where in local jurisdictions
   information systems could have a limited
   impact on social service delivery poli-
   cies the manner in which information
   systems have been organized (usually as
   Czars of local information policy) pre-
   vents the participation of local pro-
   fessionals actually engaged in service
   delivery and thereby limits the utility
   of the information system for changing
   local policies.*

4. *And finally that the whole emphasis in
   current information theory is that in-
   formation is a cost which can be reduced
   by more efficient storage and collection.
   Little new information is being collected.
   Moreover very little effort is spent in
   most installations in analysing informa-
   tion; instead there exists the simplistic
   belief that information is knowledge, and
   that the better organization of existing
   information pools can answer critical
   policy questions. Any social scientist
   who looks into the kinds of data stored
   in the local welfare, police, court, or
   health information systems in his area
   will quickly find a wealth of adminis-
   trative information useless for policy
   analysis or formulation.*

*D.D. McCracken also will address himself pri-
marily to topic two. However he will stress his
essential optimism on the value of informed
opinion in decision-making processes. Obviously
there are a lot of exceptions and counter ex-
amples to that optimism, but there is room for
someone with technical knowledge and a concern
about the public good to have an impact with
a good letter to his congressman or with tes-
timony at a state legislative hearing,etc.*