Create a Corporation for Public Network Applications: Beyond the Information Superhighway

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The Clinton Administration has set up a high-level Task Force whose mission is to flesh out the concept, advanced especially by Vice President Gore, of the information infrastructure. The idea is to create a framework in which the private sector can speed up the construction of advanced telecommunications infrastructure, without forgetting rural America or spending too many scarce budget dollars.

Putting together the sectors in which America is strong—communications networks, media entertainment, and computers can have great benefits for economic growth, opportunity, and mobility. But we must also prepare ourselves to deal, from the beginning, with its undesirable side effects.

Let us recall how much the Interstate Highway system changed post-World War II America. It transformed the way we live, work, shop, and socialize. It radically changed the cityscape. In the 19th century, the railroads similarly remade the American social geography. Might not the electronic superhighways have similar effects, far beyond those of making the American economy more competitive?

The powerful digital fiber highways and byways linked in a diverse network of networks, together with new generations of smart personal mobile communicators (also under consideration in Washington), that might end up in everybody's lapel, will create a society whose members

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are ubiquitously interconnected. It would be naive to imagine that these new capabilities would be used just for the same old purposes.

In the 70's Marshall McLuhan predicted the emergence of the "electronic global village," an inspiring image, communal and peaceful. But instead, technology is helping to create narrow and specialized electronic neighborhoods, "telecommunities" of people with shared interests and outlooks. As one gathers distant electronic friends and colleagues, the local bonds of community weaken. The work environment, similarly, loses its territorial connection. Many white collar workers will not work at any particular location or employer, but will be tethered electronically to "virtual" corporations of internetworked managers who bid for particular skills from freelancers.

Given the limitations of humans to interact and to handle information, if one develops better and cheaper routes of communication, old ones atrophy. Communications technology connects people in new ways, which also means that it disconnects people from traditional community patterns. One example is religion. Today's electronic churches gather adherents through satellite channels, 800 numbers, and telemarketing, in the process weakening traditional denominations and neighborhood churches that are a mainstay of community. Another example is politics, where the term "political network" becomes one of telecommunications reality as electronically mobilized organizations develop outside the established parties.

The federal initiative of the information infrastructure will accelerate these tendencies. As one reshapes communications, one inevitably reshapes communities. If traditional community institutions are worth preserving, they must modernize into telecommunities to serve their constituencies in new ways, or else they will decline just as Main Street did when shopping centers and malls came on the scene.

Mainstream community organizations are slower to transform themselves electronically than business enterprises or fringe non-profit organizations. To reshape institutions electronically requires initiative, money, and expertise. In many cases, it will not be profitable enough for commercial operators. Grassroots efforts are essential, but they need to be supplemented by the resources and expertise of the information industry, government, universities, and computer enthusiasts. One way to do so is to create a non-profit Corporation for Public Network

Applications, funded by industry and government. Such an organization would provide seed money and channel expertise to various local pilot projects. Rather than developing leading-edge technology for advanced users, it would help technically small, unsophisticated, but socially important non-profit organizations to modernize themselves. The corporation, and its equivalents on the state level, could experiment, evaluate, inform, and recommend. Its non-governmental status would help it to be supported primarily by private sector money, and to draw unbureaucratically on the enormous creative energy of the computer network community.

The policy conclusion should not be to slow the rapid evolution of a high-technology infrastructure. But we should be ready to deal with some of the inevitable negative impacts, too, in a way that the planners of the automobile highway system never did when it came to the cities.