Book Review

NetPolicy.Com: Public Agenda for a Digital World was written by Leslie David Simon, a Senior Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and a member of the U. S. State Department's advisory committee on international communications and information policy. In this comprehensive treatment of information technology policy, the author outlines the history and power of information technologies preceding the Net and the series of events that led up to the birth of the Net. Simon discusses the challenges that information technologies pose to policymakers such as the mega-convergence of different media. He also examines a range of current and future public policy issues, including digital democracy, digital economics, electronic government (e-government) technical regulatory issues, legal concerns, and research and development policies. The perspective the author takes is expansive, examining information technology issues cross-nationally, and including the actions of international organizations and the private sector as well as governments. Simon concludes with priorities that he feels lawmakers must possess to deal with cyberspace policy challenges. Some of these priorities include a common understanding of privacy, universal access to the Net, and plans for community growth.

The author reviews the history of the policy issue, the legal framework and actions of various government commissions, and private sector organizations formed to respond to policy issues regarding the Internet. After this, the author proceeds to make policy recommendations that pertain to education and the work force, universal access, privacy, and security issues, and suggests suitable roles for both the private and public sectors. Without consideration of these issues, Simon wisely believes that it is unrealistic that Internet use will be truly global and that economic woes problems may ensue for the citizens of nations that do not heed this advice.

Simon notes that the proliferation of Internet usage has implications for government agencies and services. Government agencies as well as private enterprises have much to gain from the opportunities that digital technology affords them. Government services that have been traditionally offered from government offices during limited hours can be offered to constituents from the convenience of

their homes 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Moving government services online is also cheaper, more efficient, curbs government employee corruption, and promotes economic growth. Simon identifies some of the services that various governments are offering online. These services include the conveniences of filing taxes and the renewal of various licenses. However, as Simon cautions later in the book, moving government services online should not be done until a nation's Net readiness has been gauged and privacy and security issues have been resolved. He advocates the bridging of the digital divide, the gap between those who have access to information technology and those who do not, by means of public-private partnerships among other strategies.

The author states that digital technology may have favorable implications for participatory democracy, as well. It is possible that the availability of information on the Internet may make voters more informed and if elections are moved online that voter turnout may increase. Citizens may also participate in online forums that can facilitate more representative policymaking. However, as with the movement of government services online, the author warns that the issues of privacy and security must also be addressed before online elections can become a widespread reality.

Some of NetPolicy.Com's strengths lie in the author's policy background and the extensiveness of the research. This book is current and well researched as the author reviewed existing legislation and literature on the issues related to the information age quite extensively. The suggestions of other researchers (Bertot et al. 1997, Katz & Aspden 1997, Layne & Lee 2001, and West 2000) regarding these policy issues are consistent with the recommendations that Simon makes, too.

The book does contain one shortcoming, of which the author was aware. Many of Simon's recommendations are not grounded in any type of data or statistical analysis. As the author states: "We need better measurements of the Net and its economic and social effects. All sound policies begin with sound data" (392).

Despite the aforementioned weakness, Simon clearly attained the objectives that he set forth in his book. The author presents information in a manner that allows persons inside and outside of academia and government agencies to understand how information technologies work, the history of information technologies, and the

legislation that has passed or was considered by policymakers to deal with the policy issues that cyberspace has presented. The book, while comprehensive in its approach, is also concise and well written. NetPolicy.Com can and should be used by policymakers and scholars to gain a broad-brush understanding of current and future cyberspace policy issues. The book should also be read by anyone who is concerned about how the Net will further impact social, economic, and political life.

References

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