

Introduction

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NATIONAL INFORMATION POLICY is beset with antinomies. On the one hand, the very thought of a national information policy is anathema to one who believes that the first amendment is all the information policy we need. The defense of such a position is grounded in the fear that any information policy, other than that provided for in the constitution and its amendments, is a step toward the demise of democracy and the erection of a totalitarian state. The information policy of the Soviet Union—i.e., the absolute political control of information—in this person's view is seen as the logical outcome of any national information policy.

On the other hand, the continued absence of a national information policy is genuine cause for alarm to one who perceives the potential danger of unregulated private and public actions regarding information. The absence of an information policy is detrimental, it is argued, because government has failed to control actions that can be unjust or harmful to individuals, corporations, and the body politic.

The characteristic of antinomy also pervades disputes over two areas of information policy that are currently receiving much attention: privacy and secrecy. For example, privacy concerns at the national federal level are mainly dealt with in the Privacy Act of 1974 and its amendment. The act's provisions attempt to protect the individual citizen from the unwanted and often unwarranted intrusions of government and private institutions. On the other hand, economic health,

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crime prevention and control, and national security needs are often cited as justifications for these intrusions. As far as secrecy is concerned, it is most often discussed in the realm of science and technical information policy and national commercial information policy. The government, or more precisely, the executive department, is attempting to walk a tightrope, balancing national security goals against the requirements of technical innovation. The first requires restriction on providing information to foreigners, the latter requires open channels of information flow between the United States and foreign scientists. Because of their currency, importance, and sharing of certain characteristics—such as antinomy—privacy, secrecy, and national information policy were seen as an appropriate topic for an issue of *Library Trends*.

Generally speaking we do not yet have a volume that attempts to deal with this complex subject in any comprehensive way. Answers to many questions relating to this broad area still elude us. We really don't know, for example, what information policy is, in spite of the large amount of literature devoted to the topic.¹ This quandary has come about because of the broad range of policies often subsumed under the rubric of information policy, and also because we have not been specific about the goals and results of information policy.

For example, people in communications, computers, commerce, and library and information science all use the term *information policy* but apparently mean different things by it. Because there is little interdisciplinary work done in this area or much sharing of perceptions among researchers in these various fields, claims about the goals of information policy often rest solely on the ideology or narrow disciplinary view of policy analysts and policymakers alone, and not on any empirical grounds or long-term experience with a specific type of information policy.²

Along with our ignorance of the nature of information policy, we are unsure about what it promises or threatens. Will it help to ensure progress, justice, and other human ideals? What values does it hold dear—economic and technical supremacy, democracy, or some other as yet unspecified value? Are all these mutually exclusive or mutually compatible? Once we pursue a given policy, what will the results be; in what way will implementation of a desired policy distort the original intent of the policymakers? How will it all affect our culture, our economy, or moral sensibilities?

How has technology been related to the urge for the political control of information? For that is what information policy is, the political control of information. Is it a benign or malignant force or simply a neutral tool in the hands of unpredictable humans?

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To begin to answer some of these questions, the authors in this number of *Library Trends* have written the following essays. But the reader should not expect a cogent blueprint to emerge here, or, for that matter, a philosophical prescription for the years ahead. Description and analysis are needed first. Without these two, our subsequent conclusions would be ill-informed and worthless. On the other hand, we have all tried to avoid the sterility of unattainable but often desired objectivity. One of the traits common to all the papers is a grappling (and at this stage unfortunately that is all that it probably can be) for an understanding of this phenomenon of information policy. Like most of the existing information policy literature, these essays are broadly descriptive or legally based. But in all of them the issues of privacy and secrecy are inextricably intertwined. Russell Shank provides an excellent perspective on the privacy issue by examining its manifestations over the last century-and-a-half. David Linowes and Colin Bennett give a superb analysis of the formation of the Privacy Act of 1974 and in the course of their exposition attempt to apply contemporary political science theory to the categorization of information policy. Stephen Gould and Harold C. Relyea each cogently demonstrate the complexity of the issues surrounding, respectively, national scientific and technical information policy and national commercial information policy and their relation to secrecy.

The next three essays were the most difficult to compose because, in addition to dealing with existing laws and policy phenomena, the authors also had to confront the current confusion and abstract nature of information policy itself. Fran MacDonald clearly explains the relation among technology, privacy, and electronic freedom of speech, an area constantly changing because of the fluid nature of technology itself. Toni Carbo Bearman, from her vantage point as former executive director of NCLIS, gives us a prescient insider's view of national information policy trends. M.E.L. Jacob and Debbie Rings then comprehensively explore the labyrinthine area of our national information policy and its relation to other (foreign) national information policies and international information policy. Finally, Bob Burger provides a framework for understanding analyses of information policy and for evaluating their relevancy.

Here we are dealing with some of the most important issues of our time—technology, culture, and human values, and the attempts of nation-states to control and influence them. We must face these issues without either assuming the virtues of *laissez-faire* which have at times proved to be economically and politically disastrous or of increased regulation which some rightly fear may lead to totalitarianism. Rather,

we should seek solutions with sober, rational, and compassionate minds. The efforts of the contributors to this symposium would be justified if their essays helped to start us on such a path of discovery and promise.

References

1. Information policy literature is highly scattered and not apparently recognized as a subdiscipline of policy studies. Note its absence, for example, in Nagel, Stuart S., ed. *Basic Literature in Policy Studies: A Comprehensive Bibliography*. Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1984.

2. For an overview of those disciplines that study information, see Machlup, Fritz, and Mansfield, Una, eds. *The Study of Information: Interdisciplinary Messages*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1983. While there is abundant evidence of cross-disciplinary fertilization in information studies dealing with cognition and learning, there is little evidence of such sharing in the policy arena.