APPLICATION OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS IN SUPPORT OF ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This study has examined four activities related to public access to government information: the United States and Great Britain approaches to information access; that proposed by the Treasury Board Task Force on Privacy and Access to Information in anticipation of the passage of a freedom of information act; the Enquiry Bureau of the DSS Task Force on Service to the Public; and the National Library of Canada Open Systems Network approach to the distribution pof (sic) bibliographic information; with a view to establishing ways in which telecommunications could be effectively used in support of them.

The study led to recommendations that bibliographic information produced in support of public access to government information be integrated with the National Library information, and that telecommunications support, including modified TELIDON, be provided to the National Library Network.

LES TELECOMMUNICATIONS EN TANT QUE SUPPORT A L'ACCES A L'INFORMATION GOUVERNEMENTALE

RESUME

Les télécommunications peuvent être utilisées pour appuyer les initiatives des gouvernements relativement à l'accès du public à l'information et aux services auprès du public. Ce rapport est le résultat d'une étude des activités, au Canada et ailleurs dans le monde, qui ont pris en considération le rôle les télécommunications, Télidon inclus, dans ce contexte. Des recommandations pour l'utilisation des télécommunications en relation avec le rôle de l'information scientifique seront ici discutées.

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INTRODUCTION

There is currently a great deal of interest in several countries in making government information more available to citizens. This includes both the information that governments prepare specifically for distribution, such as weather reports and forecasts, health advisories, regulations and press releases; and information that is not, such as committee and study reports, internal memoranda and correspondence, and the rest of the immense collection of records that is accumulated during the normal course of government activity. This interest has manifested itself in Freedom of Information Acts in the United States and Great Britain, and the introduction of such legislation in Canada. Even though it has not been enacted as yet in Canada, its presence has modified the attitude and procedures of a number of Government departments and agencies. Concern for public understanding of government programs has led to the introduction of information services such as the Department of Supply and Services' Telidon-based information kiosks, set up in shopping malls and similar locations around the country.

The authors conducted a study for the Department of Communications, Canada, to examine the role that telecommunications technology might play in assisting public access to government information. As originally conceived, the study was to propose and evaluate various scenarios in which telecommunications technology could be used by the public or by the information providers to facilitate public access to government information. As the study was conducted intensive efforts were being made by a number of agencies here and abroad to define and organize methods for public access to government information. The authors rapidly found that the study had to consider the entire problem: the telecommunications component could not be considered in isolation, nor divorced from the immensity of the problem of collecting, identifying, indexing, and otherwise making the information available in the first place; nor from the processing and screening of requests for access to it.

A number of developments in telecommunications and computer-communications, have all combined to focus attention on the possibility of access to government information by the public, either directly or through intermediaries, via telecommunications. Typical are the introduction of public data networks that allow for economical access to data bases from remote terminals; the proliferation of such terminals; the development of exciting new display technologies such as Telidon; and a growing awareness of the degree of international cooperation required to achieve information exchange.

When it comes to achieving public access, there are a number of scenarios that might be considered, each involving a higher level of automation. At one end of the scale is a system much like the present one where an information-seeker contacts a government information contact who processes the request for information. The processing involves many steps, which in turn depend on many factors which relate to the form in which the information is stored, the way in which it is indexed, the availability of the indices, the regulations regarding disbursement of the material, the specificity of the request, the department or agency involved, and so on.

Any scenario describing a way in which telecommunications might be used in the process of effecting public access to government information must depend on a number of assumptions about the nature of the request, the regulations governing the dissemination of information, the form in which the information is catalogued, and the form in which it is stored, and hence has no more validity than the assumptions themselves.

Let us consider very briefly a few of the variables that are involved, some of which have managerial and bureaucratic implications of awesome proportions.

Requests may be for information about a subject or for a particular document or record. They may be directed to the government at large or to a specific department or sub-division thereof. Requests may be made by individuals, organizations or institutions, or by information brokers acting on behalf of their clients.

Regulations might dictate the classes of information that could be requested, the format of the request, the speed and form of the responses that must be made, the responsibilities for handling and responding to the request, the cost of requests, and the means of reply; as well as the duties and responsibilities of information sources in identifying the information they create.

Information might be catalogued by content, title, record number, date; by department or sub-division; and so on. The catalogue might cover all government holdings or might include only those of small units. It might cover current records only or

include those for the entire history of the country. The catalogue might include major documents only or could include everything down to internal memoranda.

Information could be stored in the form in which it was created: most likely on paper, but it could be on audio or video tape, or, nowadays, on the magnetic disk from a word processor or in a computer memory. Information could be in reproduced form on photocopies, microfilm or microfiche. Note that it is highly unlikely that a very large percentage of it will ever be in 'machine readable' form, i.e. stored in a computer compatible electronic form, or even printed in a form that can be scanned by an optical character reader.

As well, the rate of development in information technology (that is, telecommunications and computer technology and systems engineering) in terms of capability, cost and universal availability is truly remarkable.

Concerns such as these led the researchers to the conclusion that scenarios, especially those with specific economic or technical solutions were highly suspect and hardly reliable. They then concentrated on an approach of examining what the 'leaders' in the field were doing (a recognized technique of technological forecasting) in the context of what had worked in analogous situations (the historical perspective approach to technological forecasting).

U.S. AND BRITISH APPROACHES

The system developed in the United States for making government information available to the public is highly advanced at one extreme and relatively primitive at the other. It involves, between these extremes, a degree of flexibility that is instructive to consider.

When a person makes a request for information, he does so in a standard format. Under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, he must get some sort of reply from the target of his request. This target is an appropriate Freedom of Information (FOI) officer of the government, who has been identified in a privately published and frequently updated Federal Yellow Book. This is an index of agencies and their officers specifically designated per the U.S. law, as sources of information. Each agency is obliged to publish a description of its own organization and the process by which it makes information available (with certain exclusions) to all who may request, and pay the small fee for, that information. If the requested information is denied, the person may appeal.

The information system is, to say the least, decentralized.

Each department and agency has its own information system, which is updated in microfiche at the end of each working day. As a result, there is minimal lag in information retrieval for those agencies with 'interlocking' systems. With such systems it is possible for the more sophisticated user to simply pay a private information retrieval service to access the data base of the Department where the required information is stored. There is no accepted standard for storing, gathering or distributing information in the different units: each formulates its own information program. Consequently, some departments, such as Energy, are exceptionally well indexed and cross-referenced, while others whose information is not so much in demand have more primitive systems. This variability of product may be a function of the variability of systems; making it likely that those agencies whose information is most in demand would have the most up-to-date information systems; and, as well, the most complete and readily accessible product.

As has been stated, there is no central data bank, and the U.S. government information industry thrives at the agency level. A proposed piece of U.S. legislation, the "Paper Burden Reduction Act" would result in the establishment of a central depository for data collections. The spirit of the Act is to limit intrusion into people's lives by a multitude of government agencies, as information gathered by one would be available to all.

British government information services are more like those boradly envisaged in Canada than the U.S. services are. In Britain, every minister is responsible to Parliament for the information policy of his Department. A central Office of Information is a common service agency in providing material to meet the different departments' information requirements; however, the information divisions within departments may handle correspondence from the public as well as telephone and in-person inquiries.

TREASURY BOARD TASK FORCE ON PRIVACY AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

To prepare the federal government to discharge its responsibilities under Bill C-43, the Treasury Board of Canada created a Task Force to deal with the obligations. The Task Force was composed of Treasury Board personnel and others from Statistics Canada, Public Archives, Supply and Services, and National Defence. The Task Force, recognizing that implementation of the bill would be "a task of immense magnitude" worked to a tight schedule to:

- produce and distribute an Access Register (which will be used to describe in detail all classes of records regardless of location, physical form or medium of storage) and the Privacy Register;

- develop and distribute all forms necessary to implement the Bill and its regulations;

- produce regulations to implement the Bill;

- produce policies, directives and guidelines to ensure smooth implementation of the Bill;

- develop a program to inform the public of their rights under the Bill and how they might access information held by government institutions.

In the proposed Canadian system (Bill C-43) all records under the control of a government institution are accessible with specified exclusions. Records, in the Canadian usage, means any documentary material regardless of physical form, except for already published material or that already in the public domain. Each department must publish a description of the organization and its responsibilities; a description of all records under the control of each institution; and the title and address of the person to whom requests for information are to be sent. This information must be updated regularly. Requests for information must be answered in some form within thirty days; there will be an Information Commissioner to investigate complaints; and an appeal may be made to a federal court in the case of a denial of access.

The Task Force produced a manual addressing the key issue of the legislation, i.e., the procedures to be used by department Record Managers to account for their information holdings for purposes of producing the Access Register. Other aspects of the legislation such as access procedures, controls on the collection, use and disclosure of personal information, records scheduling and general records management policy are being formulated. The Task Force developed Federal Register Entry forms for Function and Classes of Records.

The Treasury Board Task Force conducted a pilot study involving thirteen government agencies with the objective of testing the effectiveness of the information inventory approach, preliminary procedures for processing access requests, and the records management policies now in place. The pilot study revealed that, while the Records Management program could be used as a basis for records inventory, many agencies did not adhere to it too well and immense amounts of information are maintained independently of central records management. These records are to be subject to Bill C-43 and it will be a huge task to keep track of them.

The Task Force pilot study revealed that many departments file information under highly technical file names, whereas the Access Register is to be easily readable. It was discovered that it is difficult to link particular classes of records to specific functions, tasks and organizational units within an institution.

The project appears to have revealed the need for agreed terms of description: the classic categorization/abstracting/keyword problem.

The pilot project revealed the need for an adequate number of full-time personnel, suitably organized and of the proper level. It also showed the necessity of handling informal requests as well as formal ones. It appears that informal requests will continue to be handled by existing departmental information policies and routine procedures; whereas requests under the legislation will require disciplined procedures, with close collaboration between information staff and line managers. It was noted that most information requests are directed to the most readily accessible office, which implies that procedures must be decentralized to a considerable degree.

The Task Force devoted considerable effort to the design of forms as part of a comprehensive access package for the public. They do not seem to have given much thought to computer-mediated requests or computer-assisted processing.

It would appear that the Task Force on Privacy and Access to Information has been concerned, at least so far, mainly with the organization of descriptors such as the Access Register of goverment agencies.

DSS TASK FORCE ON SERVICE TO THE PUBLIC

Recently, the Department of Supply and Services introduced several innovations in an attempt to improve the availability of government information to the general public. This activity is not tied in with the Freedom of Information Act, but is certainly relevant. The innovations include information service bureaus; the "Blue Pages" in current Canadian telephone directories; a telephone referral service; and TELIDON carrels in public places, such as the lobby of 240 Sparks Street, in Ottawa.

The DSS service bureaus, or walk-in inquiry centres, will have a staff whose job it is to respond to the information demands of citizens on a face-to-face basis. The bureaus will not be general purpose information offices, but rather facilities where Canadians can get help in finding the right information sources in government. The staff will be guided by a reference library of information based on an index of Government of Canada Programs and Services.

THE NATIONAL LIBRARY NETWORK

The National Library of Canada has been working to develop a

network of inter-connected computerized bibliographic centres which appears to be the most comprehensive and flexible in terms of coping with future demands and elaborating present possibilities, such as the accommodation of Telidon.

The objectives of the National Library program are, very briefly, to develop a decentralized bibliographic network to share information in a cost-effective manner; to fund research, etc., prerequisite to the development of a nation-wide network; to provide access to other data banks; and to establish the appropriate management infrastructure. The technical approach to the implementation of the network is fully compatible with other advances in computer communication network design. The National Library group has considered the question of standards, not only in the communiations field, but also with regard to indexing of information, query language, and information preparations. It would appear that the National Library network does what passage of the freedom of information act would require any information system to do.

The National Library Network Project has already considered the use of Telidon in the network, perhaps through the participation of all libraries across Canada. Much work will have to be done on the marriage of Telidon to significant data bases, in a way useful for information seekers. Hope that this problem will soon receive serious attention can be found in some of the approved applications under the federal government's Industry Investment Stimulation Program in which a number of applicants will be developing data bases, not all of which will be trivial trees.

It is clear that the essential problem with public access to government information is not one of telecommunications, nor of man-machine interaction directly. The problem is one of making the immense, and ever-growing, amount of government information available. In the authors' opinion the major question that must be addressed is what strategy could be devised for making government information available in the indices, formats, and possibly locations (i.e., the libraries of Canada) in which all other bibliographic information is available; which is a shift from the original concern with what sort of information system should government departments use to cope with requests from the public.

CONCLUSIONS

It appeared as a result of the study that an attempt to duplicate the experience and technological expertise of the National Library in providing for the information needs of the public would result in delay and expense; and that the simplest initial route for information search and distribution will be the library system, where electronic delivery already exists. The authors concluded

that steps should be taken to begin the integration of material designated as being available to the public, if and when a freedom of information act is passed, with the bibliographic information system being developed by the National Library of Canada; and that universal access to the library system be provided through government telecommunications facilities (including suitably developed Telidon), through public libraries across the country. In short, librarians understand the complexity of the information problem, have professional experience in dealing with it, have a highly developed concept of integrating their date bases with telecommunications which are fully compatible with emerging international standards, and should be fully supported by the telecommunications experts in government.