

Gore speaks on the Information Highway

Telecommunications policy is heating up as the Clinton Administration readies its own proposal and congressional committees appear poised to act on some version of pending bills. Vice-President Gore outlined the principles underlying the administration's policy initiative in a speech on December 21 at the National Press Club, and was scheduled to announce further details in January.

In his December speech, the Vice-President demonstrated a commendable understanding of technology as a means, not an end, saying that we must "zero in not on the technology, but what we use technology *for* . . . Most people today are primarily receivers of information . . . In this decade we will *transmit* more and more as well . . . The communications revolution recognizes each individual as a source of information that adds value to our community and to our economy." He also emphasized that the information highways must be two-way roads.

However, most of the emphasis was on the information marketplace, which would include four major components: private sector owners of the highways, makers of information appliances, information providers (including individuals with information they want to share or sell), and information customers. "Anyone who wants to form a business to deliver information will have the means of reaching customers. And any person who wants information will be able to choose among competing information providers, at reasonable prices," Gore said.

To manage a transition period, Gore announced that the administration would "support removal, over time, under appropriate conditions, of judicial and legislative restrictions on all types of telecommunications companies: cable, telephone, utilities, television, and satellite." To do this, legislative and administrative proposals will be prepared "after extensive consultation with Congress, industry, public interest and consumer groups, and state and local governments."

Washington Hotline

Carol C. Henderson

Five principles will underlie the administration's initiatives: 1) to encourage private investment, 2) to promote and protect competition, 3) to provide open access to the network, 4) to avoid creating a society of information haves and have nots, and 5) to encourage flexibility.

Access to all

Regarding the fourth principle, Gore talked about the

future of universal service and indicated the most important step was to adopt policies resulting in lower prices for everyone. But he admitted that a regulatory safety net would still be needed. "We cannot relax restrictions from legislation and judicial decisions without strong commitments and safeguards that there will be a 'public right of way' on the information highway. We must protect the interests of the public sector . . . That's essential in providing affordable services for public education, public health, and government." And further, "less fortunate sectors of the population must have access to a minimum level of information services through subsidies or other forms of a public interest tithes."

The principle of flexibility would mean leaving many details to appropriate government agencies in order to accommodate technological change, and "avoiding both extremes: regulation for regulation's sake, and the blind adherence to the dead hand of a free market economist."

The administration is not starting from scratch in crafting its own proposal, according to the Vice-President, who mentioned several pending bills introduced by key members of the congressional committees with jurisdiction over telecommunications policy. Measures referred to included the Brooks-Dingell bill (H.R. 3626), the Markey-Fields bill (H.R. 3636), and the Danforth-Inouye bill (S. 1086). Senate committee chairman Ernest Hollings is working on another bill. ■

Carol C. Henderson is deputy executive director of ALA's Washington Office, *bitnet*: ccb@alawash.org