Chapter IX

Metropolitan Governance and Telecommunications Policy: Changing Perceptions of Place and Local Governance in the Information Society

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores some implications of the emerging telecommunications networks for urban areas and concludes that new networks will do more to support metropolitan governance than to reinforce localism within traditional city and suburban municipal boundaries. Employing U.S. telecommunications policy as its setting, the chapter proposes creation of metropolitan nongovernmental organizations for urban regions to undertake telecommunications policy roles that currently are unaddressed. The proposed Metropolitan Telecommunications Organization (MTO) would represent urbanized areas interests in guiding the build-out of the new public network; in designing the metropolitan telecommunications system, in providing network security, in insuring open access and universal service, and in undertaking other important

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system governance roles that currently are not being addressed by local governments. In the U.S., MTOs would be an advocate for the values of community in society, including promoting digital democracy, community access centers, metropolitan telecommunications tax equity, and support for community institutions.

INTRODUCTION

The convergence of information flows into a common digital form that is proceeding will have increasingly important, if unpredictable, effects on our individual activity patterns, our interactions with others, and on our cities. As we avoid the attractions of the "…myth of technological determinism…that new communications technologies can 'cause' urban change …" (Graham, 1997, p. 22), we recognize that existing public policy toward urban telecommunications governance is inadequate to address the rapidly changing conditions of the "public" switched networks upon which urban culture of the late 20th and early 21st century was constructed. At this stage, it is difficult to identify the key public policy issues and options raised by deployment of the newest technologies and practices.[1] Certainly, the dramatic restructuring of the telecommunications industry in the United States, Europe, and globally since the investment bubble burst in 2000, slowed deployment of enhanced wireless technologies that may again transform the Internet and business, personal, and government communications.

This chapter identifies and contrasts traditional limited regulatory roles allowed by local governments in U.S. telecommunications policy, and a set of emerging telecommunications policy issues for local government raised by the creation of new "public" networks owned and operated by private-sector entities. In many instances, the new network providers operate without the restraining influence of traditional public regulation. Some implications of the new information infrastructures for metropolitan and local governance are explored, and it is concluded that the emerging telecommunications environments will do more to support metropolitan regionalism than to reinforce jurisdictional localism within traditional municipal boundaries.

As a device to identify the policy interests of metropolitan regions in the emerging "public" network, creation of new nongovernmental organizations for urban regions are proposed to undertake telecommunications policy roles that currently are unaddressed. The proposed Metropolitan Telecommunications Organizations (MTO) would represent an urban area's interests in the design, placement, and regulation of the new communications infrastructure within its borders. The organization's primary role would be to serve as a venue for the local articulation of community public values in telecommunications subjects, as a complement to decision making framed by prevailing corporate investment criteria. In other words, it is proposed that a public-sector led counterweight may be needed in metropolitan regions to advocate and occasionally impose local public regime values in communications networks that are currently being designed and placed by business interests pursuing corporate financial objectives. Conventionally, in the United States, these public values have been reflected in Federal Communications Commission (FCC) mandated universal service, equal access, and open access policies that worked under simpler regulatory environments. These policies are not as secure as they once were, as public interest regulation withered under the deregulatory philosophy

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