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George B. Trubow

FOREWARD
THE NATIONAL INFORMATION
INFRASTRUCTURE

By GEORGE B. TRUBOW†

During the past year, discussions regarding a National Information Infrastructure ("NII"), the Information Superhighway and the Electronic Highway have commanded unprecedented world wide attention. These newly created descriptive electronic expressions are now part of our everyday vocabulary and are permanent additions to our lexicon. We know that the AT&T slogan, "we're all connected," is not simply advertising rhetoric but in fact expresses the primary goal of NII, which is that everyone will have access to the international networks of information and electronic communication.

The coming era is lauded for the promises of "electronic democracy," electronic commerce, electronic classrooms, electronic funds transfers and electronic publishing. The employment of these promises will foster communication, develop education, and improve the quality of life for many individuals, companies, economies and countries. However, in the midst of this computer network revolution, a variety of very difficult legal, social and economic problems are being encountered. As a result, there is a need to grasp the vast array of implications and understand the ramifications of the rapidly developing electronic and information roadways. Accordingly, there is a need for a "roadmap" that will help us plot the appropriate routes on which to travel. Implicit in the roadmap, is the fiscal understanding of the costs and benefits of various routings. The following article by Mark Gordon and Diana McKenzie does a marvelous job of organizing such a roadmap.

* A.B., University of Michigan; J.D., University of Michigan; Professor of Law and Director of *The Center for Informatics Law*, John Marshall Law School. Professor Trubow also chairs the annual John Marshall National Moot Court Competition in Information Technology and Privacy Law. He is the Editor of the three volume treatise PRIVACY LAW AND PRACTICE (1987), and is the Co-Author of PRIVACY: CASES AND MATERIALS (1992). Additionally, Professor Trubow chairs various American Bar Association committees, writes and speaks widely on information and privacy law, and advises state and federal agencies.

At the outset, let's put aside arguments about whether "information superhighway" is a good metaphor and simply accept it for purposes of discussion. Vice President Al Gore coined and popularized the expression and we need not waste wit nor energy on the distraction of nitpicking the terminology. In any event, the phrase is sufficient to characterize the electronic network and the metaphor provides some useful discussion "handles."

What is NII? Just to be sure we understand the scope of the concept, our authors describe the components of this vast system. There are big stretches of the highway already in place and more are being developed and added to the network. The NII undertaking is itself a cooperative effort between government and private sector entities that are being encouraged to develop and test concepts and applications. This "roadmap" will be useful in guiding us.

What about the "rules of the road?" What are they now, where are they insufficient, and what might they be when NII is in place? Currently, we have a hodgepodge of laws and regulations that may conflict, leave gaps, or fail to address the challenges of navigating through the modern information highway. The "roadmap" provides us an overview.

How much government oversight of system development and use can be anticipated? What can inventors or developers expect in protection of their creations? Who's Liable for what and to whom? If a program failure causes injury or harm, who is responsible? And if somebody puts stolen or defamatory information on an electronic BBS, is the system operator? Who put it on the Bulletin Board Service, anyway? As of now, we do not have answers to these questions and our "roadmap" may help to provide some perspective.

At times, the information highway looks more like a bumpercar track than a safe and speedy turnpike. Those who venture upon it must be aware that for the near future we are vulnerable to being rear-ended or hi-jacked, and may even crash because of a dangerous pothole which lies in the road ahead. Nevertheless, the information highway offers untold advantages and our authors provide an excellent map to help us consider the road ahead.