



Mosco, Vincent (Editor). **Policy Research in Telecommunications: Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Telecommunications Policy Research Conference.** Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing, 1985, 458 pages.

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The proceedings of the Eleventh Telecommunications Policy Research Conference maintains the high standards and topical significance which have been set by previous editions arising from this most useful project. This annual conference, usually held in April at a site near Washington D. C., is probably the premiere gathering for specialists in telecommunications policy in North America. So as to keep the conference relevant and vibrant, each year's programme is put together by an ad hoc programme committee which naturally emphasizes different themes and issues. In recent years, three hundred or so industry people, government officials, and academics from a variety of disciplines, drawn largely from the United States but also from Canada and overseas, have participated in its formal sessions and more informal encounters.

The pervading theme for this 1983 volume is policy research in the **telecommunications field -- where and how it is being done**, its social and political as well as its economic and technical aspects, and what are its major strengths and weaknesses. Harry Trebing begins the volume well with a paper which traces the rather checkered history of policy research in the public utilities field and concludes that, for a variety of reasons, "the problem [in the 1980s] will be to redefine the appropriate role for public intervention in the face of four major factors that are transforming the public utility industries." Vulnerability to competitive pressures, the cost-price squeeze and its attendant equity and distributional causes, excess capacity and oversupply of facilities as a result of new technological possibilities, and **new areas of potential market failure are identified as the major factors** which will shape the future of telecommunications policy and regulation. Professor Trebing is not at all convinced that the proper kind of research is being done in the right places so as to influence public policy and he points critically to "the growth of client-sponsored research" and prescriptively to "the need for pluralism in research and, wherever possible, positive analysis supported by empirical verification."

Subsequent contributors echo and expand on these themes. An U. S. Federal Communication Commission regulator points to the overwhelming tendency of government research "either to support analysis associated with a current rule-making proceeding or to resolve an immediate problem facing the Commission". A state regulator argues that current forms of regulation are "fatally wounded" and that PUC's must engage in

intensive research to establish "regulation with a new purpose." A prominent expert on international telecommunications policy comments on the competing policy considerations and the absence of clear and coherent policy direction in her field and, faithfully following the fable, proclaims that "the Emperor has no clothes." And, on the basis of West German and Swedish contributions at least, it would appear that the situation is not much better in other major countries.

When it comes to the substance of policy research in telecommunications, the papers generally conform to Professor Trebing's analysis. Not surprisingly, one section of the volume focuses narrowly on the economic and technical dimensions of telecommunications policy research. The agenda of current and evolving issues in this area is covered well; but, however competent and interesting the presentations, the clash of competing industry interest is never far below the surface of the research findings. One of the key issues is, of course, the changing role of regulation. Charles L. Brown, A. T. & T.'s legendary chairman, argues from emotion more than research that his now-divested company be allowed to operate "on a fair and level competitive playing field" while other industry people and regulators are not fully persuaded and tend to favor "transitional arrangements" and/or clear "market-rules" before the game begins in earnest. Other important issues such as cross-subsidization and its impact on pricing, the future of the local telephone service monopoly, and the continuing relevance of ownership restrictions within the communications sector draw similar attention and informed discussion. On the whole, the policy research in this section of the volume is competent, **interesting**, and generally transparent in terms of the interests involved.

Treatment of the social and political dimensions of telecommunications policy research tends to be weaker. This is no doubt explained in part by the greater difficulty of doing good social and political analysis generally in all areas of public policy but it also seems to reflect a failure to engage in systematic analysis in favour of the pursuit of more idiosyncratic themes. Nevertheless, there are at least a couple of good contributions in this section of the volume. Two papers concentrate on the proper meaning of the term "public" in "public telecommunications" in light of rapidly evolving technology in the communications field and both conclude that there is need for a new sense of "common purpose" in the way telecommunications and information technology is used. Likewise, several papers in this section and elsewhere in the volume focus on policy research related to the introduction of new technology. In particular, James McConnell provides an **interesting analysis**, in the case of cable television and videotext in Great Britain, of how broadcasting policies came to be "subordinated" to industrial and economic goals. As well, there are three interesting treatments of the policy problems associated with introducing direct-broadcasting satellites in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, the latter two of which highlight the important cultural implications of moving towards new technology. To restate the initial point, however, this reviewer finds much of the work on telecommunica-

tions policy research of a social and political character too unsystematic and idiosyncratic to be of much direct relevance in policy-making.

Brief mention might also be made to the "Canadian contribution" to this conference as an ongoing institution as well as to this particular proceedings. The Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, along with other Canadian government and industry bodies, have contributed directly to the support of this conference and a contingent of Canadians participate prominently in its sessions each year. In addition to other contributors scattered throughout the volume, a couple of prominent Canadians then engaged in on-the-job policy research presented their views. A. W. Johnson, then President of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, provides a rather standard treatment of broadcasting as a reflection of society while John Meisel, then Chairman of the CRTC, applies his usual witty commonsense to a treatment of Canada's involvement in international telecommunications. While much of the conference has a decidedly American flavour to its agenda, many of the issues examined and the policy research presented has indirect if not direct relevance for Canada. More importantly, the ability to gauge Canadian telecommunications issues in a broader North American and international context is particularly invaluable.

One concluding criticism -- about which probably little can be done -- is that, given the nature of the subject-matter being discussed and the seeming availability of technological solutions, it is both ironic and unfortunate that it takes virtually eighteen months to see the proceedings of this most useful conference published and available to the larger telecommunications community. Nevertheless, the delay is at worst a minor inconvenience and should not be allowed to detract from the quality and topicality of this volume.