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MEMORANDUM

To: Participants in the Conference on the Role of Information
in the Economy

From: A.R. Dobell

Date: 17 May 1986

Re: Paper on the Ownership of Information

Following up her memorandum to you of April 28, 1986, Toni Carbo Bearman's office has asked that I circulate directly to you a draft of my paper for the forthcoming meeting in Boston May 28. The attached outline notes and partial draft paper are intended to provide a basis for discussion at that meeting.

OUTLINE NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS

by

Rod Dobell

May 28, 1986

An Information Policy Agenda: Balancing the Ticket

(Cultivating the Tree of Knowledge through Public Investment
versus
Harvesting the Fruits of Wisdom Through Private Property)

I wish to examine the intellectual property issue—protection against piracy and counterfeiting, for example—in conjunction with the distributional issue—rights of access to information and the threat of information poverty, for example. This entails dealing with externalities associated with common-property information resources on the one hand, and network externalities on the other. In particular, I hope to consider the balancing of public ownership of an accessible common-property knowledge base and data access capabilities against private ownership of information retrieval systems, image processing capabilities and intellectual property.

Obviously an essential issue then becomes the development of policy to ensure that public goods are converted into private assets only under conditions which reflect the public interest and assure equity in general access to information.

This meeting is planned as the first of three sessions at which our three groups will meet to thrash out some ideas on an information policy agenda for our three nations. I take it therefore that at this first meeting, I have the luxury of surveying the issues rather than the burden of supplying the answers.

At any rate, I am going to indulge myself by acting as though that presumption is valid.

I therefore begin by asking not "what is truth" or "what is knowledge" but "what is information"? (briefly) and (at slightly greater length) what is the problem in the ownership of information?

(Note that international trade issues reflect domestic efforts—potential revenue streams for the nation are foregone when potential revenue streams for the individual are eroded.)

My thesis—and I put it forward simply as a hypothesis for test over these next two meetings—is that technology is moving in a direction which makes possible the notion of a common data pool as a common property resource—a collective heritage—and information policy should focus on private information property rights—ownership of information—as value-added services built on this common data pool. The thesis for examination, in other words, is that one can protect proprietary fresh images (new intellectual property) while preserving general access to the common data pool.

For this purpose, my remarks at the May 28 meeting in Boston will draw primarily on three streams of materials. The first stream of literature is that on the characteristics of the information society, reviewed in part in the paper by A.R. Dobell and L.G. Vagianos, "The Information Economy and the Nation-State", published in the proceedings of a Conference on The Information Economy: Implications for Canada's Industrial Strategy, May, 1984 (Calvin C. Gotlieb, editor), or in the Science Council of Canada publication The Uneasy Eighties: The Transition to an Information Society, by Arthur J. Cordell.

The second stream is that bearing on social goals and equity in the provision of information and communication services as outlined, for example, in the proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Telecommunication Policy Research Conference at Airlie House in April 1985.

The third literature is that on the economics of investment in R&D, outlined in the attached partial draft.