

**Civilizing Cyberspace:
Policy, Power, and the Information Superhighway**

Steven E. Miller

Addison-Wesley 1996

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 1996 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

Will the United States National Information Infrastructure (NII) be controlled by a few massive companies, vertically integrated to control production and distribution of information at all levels? Or will it resemble the current Internet, where individuals can provide as well as consume information? Do we face a future where privacy is severely limited, where the divide between rich and poor has been widened by massive inequalities in access to information, and where free speech is just a memory? Can we hope for increased accountability of governments and corporations, a more politically active population, and educational and economic benefits for everyone? These are the kind of questions that Steven Miller addresses in *Civilizing Cyberspace*.

Miller begins with a brief look at what the NII is and some of the different visions of what it should be. He then surveys the major players in the policy stakes — state, federal, and local governments, regulatory bodies, cable TV operators, local and long-distance telephone companies, the mass media, the computer industry — and the complex relationships between them. This includes such things as an overview of the various technologies that are likely to have a role in the NII and a brief history of United States telecommunications regulation.

After laying this groundwork, Miller presents the central issues in four chapters. The first looks at the idea of universal service, explaining what this means in the context of the NII and what the options for achieving it are. The second is about the implications of networking for politics, in particular the potential of universal access to public information, experiments with community free-nets and electronic democracy, and the importance of free speech. The third tackles the complex of issues centred around privacy, encryption and civil liberties. The fourth is about

communities: the Internet community, virtual communities, and the use of networks in building communities. *Civilizing Cyberspace* closes with a brief look at the economic implications and possibilities of the NII (including intellectual property rights) and a summary of the practical actions, at all levels, that Miller sees as crucial.

The most impressive thing about Miller's book is that it avoids hype, overstatement, and polemic. Miller is neither a neo-Luddite doomsayer prophesying disaster, an optimist proffering a technological utopia, or someone so blinded by their political prejudices that they can't communicate with those who don't share them. He holds passionate beliefs about his subject — he is a strong supporter of public broadcasting, government regulation to avoid monopoly and other evils, civil liberties, government and corporate accountability, and grassroots democracy, among other things —, but he is quite open about this and he understands that many do not agree with him on these issues. (He briefly discusses the differing political stances — libertarian, progressive/radical, liberal, corporate conservative, and state socialist — most commonly brought to bear on networking policy issues.) Even if you disagree with his normative suggestions, his book will still be a valuable source of information.

Civilizing Cyberspace is the best single volume introduction to the policy issues surrounding the Internet I have seen. Miller says he wrote it for information technology professionals and non-technical people "piqued by all the talk about the Information Superhighway", but I think the most important audience for his work consists of the politicians and lobbyists actually involved in formulating policy. (Given the near-unanimous passing of the lunatic Communications Decency Act since *Civilizing Cyberspace* went to press, many of these obviously *need* to read it.)

While *Civilizing Cyberspace* is very United States specific, it does consider international issues in places and its overall message is very relevant in other countries. It is unlikely that anyone will write such a book specifically about the situation in Australia, for one thing, and if we can take heed of the developments in the United States which Miller describes then being a little behind in the development of legislation about

computer networks may not be such a bad thing...

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