Information Superhighways in Sweden

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Information Superhighways are the roads for applied information technology, IT. Their use constitutes IT policy. A background for such IT policy making in Sweden shows a successive building up of interests during the 1980s. It had started as early as 1973, when a national personal integrity legislation had been defined, the worlds first, and an IT legislative authority had been created.

In the 1980s, certain administrative and telecommunicative political IT reforms were introduced, in adequate tempo. Time was given to this administrative procedure because of the fact that during the 1980s, the Swedish physical telecommunication network was expanded strongly, in an effort to place Sweden in the telecommunication forefront. The result is that Sweden in the middle of the 1990s shows a telephony penetration for ground based services of close to 70 % for all citizens, and around 15 % for mobile services. Nationally seen, this is the highest telephony penetration in the world. In 1993, full telecommunications deregulation was implemented in Sweden, placing the country in the legislative forefront. The number of competing telecommunication operators active on the Swedish market is at present approaching a dozen, with Singapore Telecom being one of them.

It is worth noting that the demand for telecommunications capacity lately has not developed as fast as the supply. Users seem to be satisfied with lower speeds than can technically be provided. Naturally, this reflects costs, tariffs for higher telecommunications capacities are still high. This also characterizes the situation in many other industrialized countries.

Concerning the broad IT political situation, as a consequence of the high market actitivity in Swedish telecom network building, the need for separate political measures in the physical network field have been limited, seen in an international perspective.

Increasing interest for use of applied IT, seen in a more general sense, motivated, however, the government to appoint a high level committee, the Swedish Information Technology Commission, in March 1994. This Commission contained seven Ministers as members, with the Prime Minister as chairman. This was an unusual construction, mirroring a new strong and broad public IT will. Its working agenda was inspired by the Delors White Paper, and the coming Bangemann report. There were no explicite terms of reference for the Commission, simply "to present reforms that by the year 2010 will place Sweden among the leading IT nations".

Already in August 1994, a Commission report named "IT - Wings to human ability" was published. Its content was broad. Suggested reforms were presented in the following areas:

- Education and research
- The legal system
- Public administration
- Health services and medical care
- Communications networks
- Industry and commerce
- IT research

A number of complementing activities were suggested, for environment protection, for the handicapped, and others. Sources for financing was presented in a number of private funds, with specific aims.

One important type of measures concerns supply of public information with the help of applied IT. For citizens, new organisational development is tried here. So called 'citizen offices', expanded libraries with good communication facilities, are now started to be used in many parts of Sweden. In these offices, public dialogues are taking place and public service is being provided to citizens. Following this, electronic contacts through personal computers in homes and at work also define good platforms for a possibly more active participatory democracy in information society.

After the general election in Sept 1994, the new Swedish government chose to wait until Feb 1995 with the creation of new measures. These were given the form of a new IT Commission. This was less politically explicite in its form, but it has the Minister for Coordination as chairman. The terms of reference for the new commission are broad. The chairman has presented the work as a "follower-up" to the thinking of the former commission, with the aim to present more precise activities, and to implement them.

The new Swedish IT Commission has defined four working areas:

* education and knowledge, culture and media
* public and private producing and consumtion
* working life development
* analysis of IT consequences

The situation for the new commission differs from the former in that it has made public that it intends to use only very limited financial resources. The funds from the first commission have been privatized, and their administrations act separated from the commission. The new commission considers itself to be more of a policy maker than a project initiator.

Lately it has been decided that an IT bill to the Swedish Parliament is to be presented in the beginning of 1996. The contents of this bill is at the time of this writing not defined, but the bill may include:

- Industrial expansion and increased employment in information society
- Legislation concerning conditions for network access and e-mail catalogues
- Education of school teachers concerning the use of IT, as
  well as IT education for adults
- Use of IT and new types of organization in working life

It is also worth mentioning that the Swedish government has created a separate public "Youth IT Council". This council has been given the form of a governmental committee, and has five young members. The council is to give proposals for good and healthy use of IT by youngsters, in school and elsewhere. A number of measures are being considered by the council, including a broad "youth IT parliament meeting" in 1996, to present suggestions about information society that we older citizens have difficulties to perhaps fully understand as clearly as our children and other young friends do. The creation of a council like this can be seen as a measure to indicate the importance of looking at the information society as a society open for the future, for our children.