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Plan Opens More Data To Public

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In the clearest indication yet of the Clinton Administration's willingness to offer broader public access to Government information, the National Science Foundation is financing a project that will make corporate filings to the Securities and Exchange Commission available free via a computer network.

The decision to support the project, which will provide access to the S.E.C.'s on-line data base of financial data from America's public corporations, is a shift away from the Federal information policies under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Those Administrations favored letting private companies sell printed and electronic versions of Government data.

Although the National Science Foundation project, which will be announced on Friday, is a test, it has broad implications for creating fast, inexpensive consumer access to public records of all sorts. The precedent could threaten the huge industry that has grown up to sell financial records, court cases and other public documents over services like Mead Data Central's Nexis and Lexis networks. Available Over Internet

The project will make disclosure of information from corporations accessible to anyone who has access to the Internet computer network through a modem or

a direct network link. The Internet, a loose collection of computer networks that is administered by the National Science Foundation, is now routinely accessible from most university campuses and businesses.

"This is a priority for this Administration," said Michael Nelson, special assistant to the director of the White House Office of Science and Technology policy. "This is another indication of the Administration's commitment to make Federal information more available to the taxpayers who paid for it." Internet access is rapidly becoming a feature of many commercial on-line computer services as well. Some 20 million computer users are connected to the Internet.

"This is a wonderful example of how the Internet might be used to provide access to Government information," said Marc Rotenberg, national director of the Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, a Washington public interest group.

In June, the Office of Management and Budget announced that it was reversing previous Administration policy that had defined Government information as a commodity, often available for sale to private industry. The new policy encourages Federal agencies to make as much information as possible available to the public with fees as low as possible.

The project underscores how rapidly changing computer and network technologies are making it possible to offer low-cost access to Government information that has previously been available only on paper in libraries or electronically on mainframe computers that were difficult and expensive to tap into from remote locations. But increasingly, that mainframe data can be transferred easily to inexpensive work stations.

It also emphasizes the rapidly increasing scope of Internet as the forerunner of a national data highway that is expected to carry computer data, video and voice conversations beginning in the next century.

The project, financed with a \$660,000 two-year grant from the science foundation, is being undertaken by the Stern School of Business at New York University and a small Washington company, the Internet Multicasting Service. They plan to make the Friday announcement.

Currently, the S.E.C. data base, called the Edgar Dissemination Service, is operated under contract by Mead Data Central. Mead acts as a data wholesaler, providing a variety of computer data feeds to the retail information industry. Commercial Charge Cited

Under this system, a retail information provider, like Mead Data's own Nexis service, charges about \$15 for each S.E.C. document, plus a connection charge of \$39 an hour and a printing charge of about \$1 a page.

The only fees to use the S.E.C.'s data base under the science foundation's project would be for access to the Internet, for which pricing varies. Commercial access can be bought for as little as \$2 an hour. But many college students now obtain Internet access as part of their tuition costs and many businesses buy a high-speed Internet connection that might cost the company hundreds or thousands of dollars each month but permits employees to share unlimited access to the network.

A legislative-affairs lawyer for the Information Industries Association, Ronald Plessner, said the industry would not oppose the project as long as the Government did not intend to restrict commercial publishing of Federal data.

"We have no problem with data bases being made available over the Internet," Mr. Plessner said. "But there has to be an interest in insuring a diversity of sources. We don't want a Government monopoly on the ownership and dissemination of Government information."

Representative Edward J. Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat who is chairman of the House Telecommunications Subcommittee has been pushing for greater public access to the S.E.C.'s Edgar Dissemination Service. He said today that he applauded the science foundation's move. 'S.E.C. Finally Gets It'

"I've been trying to launch Edgar into cyberspace for the last year, and I think the S.E.C. finally gets it," Mr. Markey said, adding that he expected the project to stimulate the commercial market rather than hurt it.

The company involved in the project, the Internet Multicasting Service, is a nonprofit organization founded by Carl Malamud, an economist who developed computer technology for the Federal Reserve Bank. Mr. Malamud has also been instrumental in creating technology that is capable of broadcasting information including audio, video and data over the Internet.

He said the data would be delayed by a day, in contrast to the instant access that is provided by some on-line publishers for financial professionals. Under terms of the science foundation grant, the New York University researchers will buy raw data and reformat them so that they can be obtained over the Internet through Mr. Malamud's organization. Mr. Malamud said he hoped to have the new data base service operating by the end of the year.

Correction: October 26, 1993

An article in Business Day on Friday, about a National Science Foundation project to distribute Securities and Exchange Commission data over computer networks, misstated the views of Ronald L. Plesser, a lawyer for the Information Industry Association. Neither Mr. Plesser nor the trade group has yet taken a position on the project.

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