Normative Issues

There is a normative dimension to government learning which deserves thoughtful attention: What should government learn and what should government not learn? First, a government should learn how to do its legally prescribed jobs efficiently. But the scope we want may be broader than government efficiency, so a second example might be that presidents should learn to lead and govern wisely.

Let me indicate several additional prescriptive issues in setting a learning agenda for government:

A third issue is the support of knowledge as a public good. The economic theory of market failure includes the argument from public-goods theory that an appropriate role of government is to supplement the functioning of the market by direct funding (as with the National Institutes of Health) or indirect funding (as with the National Science Foundation) of some types of knowledge activities. How much government should invest can be a tricky question to resolve, especially because the problem is not limited to uncaptured advantages to the current population: knowledge can accumulate and pay off, like an investment, to future generations and is thus a public good to them as well.

Moreover, the traditional policy of allowing the demand for research as a public good to be determined primarily by the demand for universities is (or should be) now in serious question. With an oversupply of Ph. D.s, there is a substantial and growing underutilized capacity for increased intelligence which could be funded. Also, the accelerating rate of global knowledge accumulation (doubling every 10 years, Price, 1963) will increasingly overload the fixed American supply of academic researchers who must perform the jobs of codifying experience with intelligence and sophistication, keeping track of all relevant literature, and remembering where they have filed things.

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A fourth way to think about government s larger agenda for learning is with the aid of democratic theory. For example, one might use the guiding injunction that government should acquire and disseminate information that increases the informed decision making of individuals both in their capacities as citizens supporting (or opposing) government and in their private lives (see, for example, Goldschmid, 1979).

In the public arena, recent legal or presidential requirements have increased government learning by mandating research in the form of impact statements (e.g., environmental, economic, community, regulatory analyses) that are publicly available documents and can enter into public decision-making processes. Such research, although probably often done after a decision has been made, has become the basis for political, legislative, and legal activities on the part of affected groups, often in opposition to executive-branch preference. Recent developments in the legal doctrine of standing to sue promise to increase such litigation (Zacharia, 1978). The Freedom of Information Act has further disseminated to the public what government has learned, albeit with occasional kicking, screaming, and damage containment games and strategies by affected agencies (see, e.g., Committee on House Administration, 1979, on recent legislation).

Beyond information on what it is doing and learning, and publishing research estimates forewarning of the impacts of what it plans to do, government also acquires and makes available information and assessments on a wide range of aspects of American life. The Census Bureau is a basic supplier of information to many users; economic time series data and forecasting supported by the federal government are ingredients in many business decisions. Government monitoring of American society and reflection of these data in publicly available statistical reports already cover an enormous range.

A wide range of information that is, in principle, useful to individuals in their private lives is also available, including estimates of the gasoline mileage for new cars, guides to cost-effective decisions on home insulation, tens of thousands of books and guides

published by the Government Printing Office indicating how to repair cars, build log cabins, treat diseased plants in a backyard vegetable garden, and so on.

The other side of the question stated at the beginning of this section is what government should not learn? It is certainly naive to trust government totally. Arguably, in many political systems, the most effective guarantee of the freedom of the people has been the inability of the government to learn about much of what is going on. Knowledge can be the basis of political intervention, especially in a pluralist society where the activities of any one group may be different from, or in conflict with, the values of some politically effective coalition that can be roused to action by better information. Further, constitutional limitations on the search powers of government, and legal guarantees on privacy of official records of individuals, express the belief that there are some things government should not learn about people (see, for example, the journal *Information Privacy);* and HEW guidelines restrict domestic learning activities in government-sponsored research to methods deemed ethical.

The only substantive area of research explicitly banned by a president has been offensive biochemical-warfare technology. But it would not be difficult to think of other areas which a cautious citizenry would bar from its government s knowledge, or, once acquired, would restrict to only some users.