TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Getting up to speed on communications

By Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska)

Putting pen to paper is no longer the common way of communicating in today's world. Whether it's in the business world, government or everyday life, people rely on the latest technology to channel their communications.

I constantly look for the latest invention to communicate even faster and more efficiently than with the previous gadget. Long gone are the days of party lines, rotary phones and 10-pound cell phones. Cordless phones, sleek laptops, and miniature cell phones that multitask are no longer a luxury but a necessity in our fast-paced world. We now listen to and watch a wide variety of music and video brought to the home through cable, broadband, satellite and the ubiquitous iPod.

No longer do I worry about strictly limiting phone calls to Alaska, as I did as a freshman senator paying $5 per minute to Alaska. Instead, my office calls Alaska dozens of times a day for pennies a minute. I use my BlackBerry when the time difference prevents me from calling Alaska, confident that the message is there when the workday begins in Alaska four hours later. And I can call my good friend Oliver Leavitt on his cell phone as he sits in his walrus-skin boat in the Arctic Ocean during a whale hunt.

Now, as chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, I want to review our communications laws to ensure that they are up to date with current technology and progress and promote and advance innovation and investment. And I welcome the opportunity to engage in a thoughtful review.

Many have asked me to unveil my plans for this review: What will the legislation look like? What will it include? These questions, however, are premature. I do not intend to roll out a comprehensive outline, which could mistakenly and prematurely predestine decisions on legislation. No outline exists.

My co-chairman and best friend, Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), and I look forward to working with all members on the committee to review deliberatively how our communications laws affect the communications industry before "putting pen to paper." Dan and I will hold a series of listening sessions with our committee members both around the country and within the Beltway before formal committee hearings to renew our understanding of these issues. We want the opportunity to listen to a wide variety of people and understand the conflicts and problems before planning what to do.

We must hear from men and women who have unique perspectives on how the current laws affect their business, their jobs and their ways of life and how these laws should be changed. Whether it is the chief engineer who is yearning to craft the latest and greatest communications system or the young man or woman who has put an entire life savings into a new startup company, these people can offer valuable perspectives on what government could do to unleash the great creative spirit of American innovation.

We hope to set aside old battles and lessen reliance on the old stovepipe system of regulation: local or long-distance, wireline or wireless, cable or DSL, spectrum licensed or unlicensed, VOIP, IPTV (and the rest of the alphabet). Instead of trying to put each into the proper regulatory box (or bureau), we want to learn about the convergence demands and develop ways to approach them that will truly nourish creativity and innovation.

PATRICK G. RYAN

Sen. Ted Stevens: Planning to review telecommunications laws.

Somewhere, a young guy or gal is thinking about a new approach — it is the farthest thing from their mind that their bright idea could be quashed by an outdated regulatory regime. Instead, the new common denominator should be what's good for the American consumer and innovator.

We must find the proper balance to make the best communications forms available to all Americans — rich and poor, rural and urban — while promoting freedom and creativity for those who seek to provide such communication to our market. In the end, when we find the proper balance and update what currently exists, the marketplace — the consumer — will determine what succeeds.

This series of listening sessions will acknowledge not only how far we have come but, more important, what we need to do to assure we will continue to evolve the best systems in the world.

Stevens is chairman of the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee.