

BROADENING PUBLIC ACCESS TO INFORMATION: WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY?

POUR UN PLUS GRAND ACCES A L'INFORMATION PAR
LE PUBLIC: A QUI LA RESPONSABILITE?

Gerald Prodrick
School of Library and Information Science
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario N6A 5B9

ABSTRACT

To achieve an intellectually open, high income society in the emerging new information environment, public access to information must be protected and broadened. This enlargement is both a community and a governmental responsibility, but more than anything else, it is the responsibility of the information professional, both individually and communally, to shape and form in the community interest, the new information services and resources. This paper focuses on questions of governance and economics in the organization and provision of information services.

RESUME

Si nous voulons atteindre le niveau d'une société ouverte intellectuellement et bien nantie au sein de ce nouvel environnement de l'information toujours grandissant, l'accès à l'information par le public doit être protégé et élargi. Cette ouverture est à la fois la responsabilité du public et du gouvernement, mais encore plus, celle du professionnel de l'information, tant individuellement que collectivement, qui doit élaborer et créer, dans l'intérêt du public, les nouveaux services et ressources de l'information. L'auteur se concentre surtout sur les aspects d'orientation et d'économie dans l'organisation et la diffusion des services de l'information.

BROADENING PUBLIC ACCESS

We, in the industrially-advanced countries, live in a society which has variously been described as the post-industrial society, Bell (1973), or the information society, The Information Economy (1977), in that the majority of persons are now employed in the services sector of the economy and directly or indirectly employed on information-type activity. Economic Council (1978). In addition, more than fifty per cent of the GNP is generated by this type of activity.

This is the reason why access to information is becoming increasingly important to the individual for his intellectual independence, for his social and political wellbeing, and for his economic livelihood. The current phrase that sums up this situation is "Information is Power" for he who lacks information or is denied access to information is denied the basis for a free and independent life. Conversely, he who controls information and restricts access to it, may thereby gain advantage at the expense of others.

In the new society, the demand for information is increasing rapidly, reflecting the intensified need for information in all aspects of life. At the same time, on the supply side, the means of storing and distributing information, using the computer and new communications technology, are expanding dramatically and becoming more economically viable every day.

With demand and supply trends of this kind operating on the situation, one might presume that the fundamental elements in the situation were highly favourable to broadening the base for public access to information to meet adequately the needs of the new information society.

Yet, there are some disturbing trends apparent that would seem to pose a threat to free and equal access. This threat arises from the growing trend to store information of all kinds, bibliographical, textual, and factual in machine-readable format in systems and networks owned privately who treat information as a marketable commodity.

There are at least three different aspects to this development which have relevance to public access. One is ownership; a second is restrictions placed on access and usage; and the third is pricing policy.

Of ownership, it has been said, "if you own the system, in essence, you can own the information". Berry (1980). This gives rise to concern over who owns information systems; the degree to which ownership is concentrated; the degree of Non-Canadian ownership; the extent to which publicly-owned alternatives need to be available; and the necessity for legislation and

BROADENING PUBLIC ACCESS

regulation. Canada, of course, has had a long history of interventions in critical areas, particularly in transportation and communication, to protect the national and the public interest primarily from external domination and this frequently has taken the form of a chosen instrument policy.

The second aspect is the degree to which discriminating control over access is or can be exercised, and what constraints need to be provided to protect the public interest with respect to access.

The third element is pricing policy. In information usage, there is an educational component, a personal investment component and a community welfare component, among others. Pricing policy with respect to direct and indirect charges, the two alternative ways of paying for information services, should be fashioned towards optimizing these components by providing for broad public access. If information is treated strictly as a marketable commodity, it is unlikely that broad public access will be supported.

There is always the choice of providing on-line machine-based information services to society at large without direct charge to the user as librarians have done with print material during the now-receding age of print. But this would be, comparatively speaking, probably an excessive charge on the public accounts in cost/benefit terms, and better perhaps handled by discriminatory pricing policies which would take account of the user's ability to pay and the purpose for which the information was intended and the externalities attached to it, with certain categories of users and use supported free of charge. Such policies could be designed to give support to broad public access to information and essentially continue the library tradition of free and equal access.

But whose responsibility is it anyway for broadening public access to information? Clearly, there is government responsibility involved as evidenced in the past by legislation, regulation and financial support at various levels of government, for respectable levels of library service throughout the country largely supported by indirect charges. This has been extended significantly recently with government action taken, primarily at the national level to reduce the long-standing government monopoly use of information and to broaden perceptively public access to government information. One would expect that this concern for broad public access to information sources would continue and extend to machine-readable information formats and be reflected in effective action in that quarter.

Librarians in the past have increasingly assumed as one of their professional duties the important social responsibility of making information broadly accessible to the public and fought to

BROADENING PUBLIC ACCESS

ensure general accessibility for those who need information regardless of their economic situation.

Librarians now need to find ways to fashion an equivalent system for providing broad access to information stored in computers and to fight along with other community groups to assert the citizen's right to information through broadening public accessibility.

BROADENING PUBLIC ACCESS

REFERENCES

- BELL, Daniel. The Coming of Post-Industrial Society. New York, Basic books, 1973.
- CANADA. ECONOMIC COUNCIL. A Time for Reason: Fifteenth Annual Review. Ottawa, 1978.
- "Librarians must fight for free access to information", MTLB News, No. 5 (August, 1980) Reporting a speech by John N. Berry III at CLA Conference, Vancouver, 1980.
- U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, OFFICE OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS. The Information Economy. 9v., 1977.