

## Editorial

Arguments about the merits of subsidised and for-profit information services seem to have died down. The trend on both sides of the Atlantic is towards treating information as a good to be purchased according to need—why subsidise unwanted services? But should some people be denied essential information because they cannot afford to pay for it? If access to essential information should be a right, then the supply of it, like the medical services in many countries, should be government-funded.

Of course the above remarks cover different kinds of information. The first kind is usually *occupationally related* information—for instance financial, scientific, or medical. The second kind, ‘essential information’ for ordinary people, is usually about *living*—such as information concerning consumer rights, housing availability, social benefits, or effective medical treatment.

‘Essential information’ is hard to define, but sometimes it is self-evident. The information which a government must provide if it is going to get any applications for its free social benefits is essential. This kind of information has to be, and is, free—so why is it that in the UK, and probably in other countries, a wide range of entitled persons don’t receive their benefits? The answer is that the information is too hard to understand. The barrack-room lawyers who understand the system get the benefits. The needy or inarticulate may not. Evidently this kind of information must be both funded and made *easily understandable*.

Most people would probably agree that it is undesirable that there should be two kinds of people in any society—the well informed and the badly informed—although most governments believe that their responsibility ends with the provision of free education. They shouldn’t. The process of becoming and remaining an ‘informed person’ is an on-going process made possible only by continuous access to understandable affordable information.

The wealth-generating segment of the population—the ‘information haves’—provide the funding for all government aid. This essential segment is increasingly assisted by libraries. Noting their requirements and ability to pay, stocks and charging policies are adjusted accordingly. We hope that libraries and government paymasters will see to it that the ‘have-nots’ are also able to have access to information. The long tradition for the provision of free library services must be continued for their benefit.

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