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Essential Federal Information Services

Efficient storage and retrieval of reliable information are of crucial importance to science, medicine, and technology. Of special value has been the development of electronic databases accessible for on-line searches. A decade ago, comprehensive access to scientific information was becoming discouragingly difficult and time-consuming. Now the trend is toward much easier access to the literature. Providing such services is increasingly a function of private enterprise, but two government activities, the National Library of Medicine (NLM) and the National Technical Information Service (NTIS), have had crucial roles which should be continued.

The National Library of Medicine and its predecessors have prepared indexes of the world's medical literature for more than 100 years. In the late 1950's, NLM recognized that the usefulness of its bibliographic publications was being threatened by the increasing volume of literature to be processed. Steps were taken to place the information in machine-readable form. In the early 1960's, NLM was a pioneer in developing equipment for photocomposition. Again, in 1971, NLM pioneered with on-line access to its bibliographic base. Today, NLM indexes more than 20,000 articles a month from about 3000 leading journals. In MEDLINE, access is possible through authors, index terms, or words in titles or abstracts. The databases provided by NLM are highly regarded by research scientists and physicians. They provide an easy way to tap the information produced by the world's biomedical scholars.

Soon after the NLM demonstrated the feasibility of on-line searching of databases in the early 1970's, commercial companies began to develop additional on-line services. The number of records available on-line has expanded sixfold.

The National Technical Information Service facilitates identification and access to specialized information developed by the executive branch of the federal government. Agencies produce reports both on paper and on magnetic tapes. NTIS provides a machine-readable database catalog of these products. Efforts that have led to the reports cost billions of dollars and copies of the reports are sought by many users, especially in the private sector. NTIS has annual sales of about \$25 million and handles more than 25,000 reports and information products per day. Much of the material inventoried by NTIS has limited sales, but a relatively complete file is still maintained. In spite of this, the revenues from sales are such that NTIS is self-supporting.

In keeping with its policy of trying to reduce the size of government, the Reagan Administration has taken steps that threaten the future vitality of the government's two major information services. In spite of the fact that NTIS is self-supporting, disposal of it to private enterprise has been proposed. Private enterprise, unless tightly governed by contract provisions, would be likely to handle only those reports whose sales were profitable.

The NLM has been under budgetary pressure which limits its ability to continue its traditions of innovation. This is unfortunate because the sums of money involved are small in comparison to the service rendered and to the \$200 billion a year or more spent on medical care. NLM has a statutory responsibility to maintain a national medical library and to make its contents effectively available through indexing. Once the index has been prepared, the additional cost of providing on-line access to it is about \$8 million a year, almost all of which is recovered through user charges. Nevertheless, NLM has been the target of an intense lobbying effort by a foreign company aimed at forcing it to increase its charges sharply. This would diminish the value of this great institution to U.S. and world medicine. NLM has achieved an exemplary record in serving its functions. It should be encouraged, not hindered, in its efforts.—PHILIP H. ABELSON