

High Quality Information for Everyone and What it Costs

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Farewell Address

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Dear Colleagues,

In the Constitutions of probably all European countries something is said about the rights of citizens on access to information. And one of the human rights is freedom of information. It is clear: to be a full member of society one has to be a well informed citizen.

But information is a broad concept, a broad term. We receive information, we are informed by radio, television, newspapers and via the Internet.

Information however is not in every degree and in any form a public commodity. There may be free access to information, but the information itself cannot always be for free, because of privacy or competition or for financial reasons. Much information is only accessible for closed user groups, or – better to say – well paying user groups.

High Quality Information even is very cost expensive as we all know. At this conference we heard about interesting new commercial strategies and differential pricing models. I hope that information providers will be prepared to apply such differential pricing models to developing and poor countries, so that they too can better take part in science and education.

It has been made clear that High Quality Information for the industry and for universities is not the same as High Quality Information for the broader public and for general society.

Structuring, organizing information is not an easy task. We heard in the audience halls and saw in the exhibition area a lot about new developments, new interfaces, new searching tools, portals, linking techniques etc. We were even allowed some science fiction like views, like knowledge chips being shot in our brains. Many of us will not survive such developments, I fear. How will the future information society look like? Of course, we can only guess. The question whether the prospects of the accessibility of information for all can be realized is difficult to be answered in an unambiguous way.

I think it is positive that all parties in the information chain seem to be willing to cooperate. Two important partners, publishers and librarians, recently have established a joint steering

group to work together on matters of common interest. They did so under the umbrella of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and the International Publishers' Association (IPA). They want to work to a common agenda and to promote – by example - common principles on copyright in the electronic environment.

They are preparing a joint statement on the archiving and preserving of digital information as well. Both parties share the opinion that this is becoming an increasingly urgent challenge for them. Progress is made, but efforts to date are inconsistent, fragmented and underfunded. And the costs of long-term archiving are high. The IPA says that while publishers generally can ensure the short-term archiving of their publications so long as these publications are economically viable, libraries (especially national libraries) are best-placed to take responsibility and the lead for long-term archiving through appropriate arrangements with publishers. On this basis publishers and libraries could share their common interests and responsibility.

It is clear that the criterium of economic viability is a basic precondition for the activities of publishers. Nobody can deny that. And nobody will deny that this criterium is important too for all functions and parts of the information chain. So, let's work together to provide excellent information services on a basis of economic viability. High Quality Information for Everyone on an affordable basis. This will indeed imply close cooperation between all partners within the information chain. Publishers have actively to explore their possibilities to optimize their contribution to the information provision. And universities and their university libraries have to bear their responsibility for a good information provision in exploring all alternatives for a viable and affordable information supply.

These days, we perceive old and new players on the information scene, aiming to look after the various information processes. Old and new players develop new services in a more or less innovative way. They are prepared to cross the borders of their traditional fields. So, publishers are inclined to offer enduser services and universities are becoming more and more active on the field of publishing. Although this might look confusing, I think these crossborder developments are very useful. New activities and new roles of information providers and distributors will be important to settle new foundations of an economically viable information market and to promote affordable access to information for as many people as possible. Who will be best able on the long run to add value to the various information processes and to offer good information services, so that High Quality Information can be better accessible for everyone, that everyone being able to pay the bill??? Answering that question today is impossible, although we have learned a lot these past three days. Let's be optimistic: there is a lot of enthusiasm everywhere and many initiatives are being undertaken.