

I believed in the ideology of *Business Week*, I would have no choice but to trust *Petroleum Intelligence Weekly* more.

In his letter asking me to subscribe to *The Wall Street Journal*, Peter Kann relates a homey story. "On a beautiful late spring afternoon, twenty-five years ago," he begins, "two young men graduated from the same college." It turns out that these men became virtual clones; both are ambitious, intelligent and married, and both have been employed by the same company since graduation. Yet by the time of their twenty-fifth reunion, one had become the president of the company and the other was a mere manager of a small department. Why? You guessed it. The implication is that the president had the moxie to subscribe to *The Wall Street Journal*.

Anyone who reads a story like that and is moved to subscribe deserves, in my opinion, the ideology he gets. America's business publications are often fun to read, for they have the money to hire good writers and researchers. But if you read them to find the truth, to uncover the knowledge that will give you power, you are, like millions of others, on the wrong rung of the great corporate ladder of success. □

■ 'THE PRIVATIZING OF INFORMATION'

Who Can Own What America Knows?

ANITA R. SCHILLER AND
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Appropriation of public resources for private enrichment, long familiar in the American experience, has now come to the newest valuable resource, information. With almost no public notice, the national stock of information, created through heavy public expenditures over the years, is steadily being removed from government custodianship and transferred to private ownership and control.

Actively promoting the privatizing of information on behalf of the new and already influential corporate information sector is the Information Industry Association. Founded in 1968, the Washington-based I.I.A. numbers among its more than 150 members some of the most powerful information companies in the country, including I.B.M., Time Inc. and divisions of The New York Times Company and the Chase Manhattan Bank. On its board of directors are representatives from McGraw-Hill, Dow Jones, Lockheed, Xerox, Mead Data Central and The Washington Post Company.

The I.I.A., whose members produce, package, transmit

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and disseminate information, claims that its primary goal is "to promote the development of private enterprise in the field of information and to gain recognition for information as a commercial product." Commonplace and benign as that may appear, it represents the reversal of a national commitment to the ideal of public knowledgeability and the informed citizen. "Information as a commercial product" is information that is produced for profit. Who can pay for it and how much it will cost become questions that affect everyone.

Information today is being treated as a commodity. It is something which, like toothpaste, breakfast cereals and automobiles, is increasingly bought and sold. It is every bit as much a physical asset as a pool of oil—it has become an essential factor in the running of the modern American economy—and indeed, supplies of the former are coveted by the business world nearly as much as the latter.

Of course, information had commercial uses and was sold long before we realized we were living in an Information Society. What is different today is that a much wider range of information has become profitable because it can be flexibly processed, selectively rearranged, and quickly transmitted and disseminated by a virtuoso new technology.

The new reality is evident everywhere. Books are "products," the Supreme Court has ruled, holding that publishers' book stocks are no different from general commercial inventories. In some cases, scientific and technical information has been placed under export control. Productivity measures have been applied to colleges and universities. Educational institutions have signed agreements with private corporations selling the rights to exclusive use of research findings.

The bulk of the national information supply is gathered by Federal agencies or is paid for by the government's large research-and-development expenditures. The cumulative holdings in the government information reservoir—census data, Congressional hearings and reports, consultants' research, departmental studies—are immense and of increasing economic value.

The private information venders are now turning to these holdings systematically and diligently. Undaunted by the widely held belief that the public has a right to information that it has paid to have produced, they have substituted the notion that nothing that can be done privately should be undertaken by the government. They—and their representatives at the I.I.A.—supplement this wisdom with the insistence that information has to be sold at a profit. Social need is regarded as irrelevant.

In the process, control of the national information base is being rapidly shifted from the public domain into private hands. If the information industry has its way, no public facility or institution involved with information will be spared.

One of the leading targets of the demolition effort is the Government Printing Office. The G.P.O. historically has been the publisher and disseminator of government-

financed and government-generated information. Although it never really fulfilled its responsibility for getting information to the public, in recent years the G.P.O. has been severely constrained and its role dramatically reduced. Budget cutbacks have hurt; so has the failure of many government agencies to use the G.P.O. as the publisher of their materials. Most damaging was the creation in 1964 of a parallel agency in the Department of Commerce, the National Technical Information Service.

N.T.I.S. has taken over a great share of government publishing activity while adhering to the I.I.A. standard of operations. "All the costs of N.T.I.S. products and services, including rent . . . salaries . . . and all other usual costs of doing business," runs a brochure the service issued, ". . . are paid from sales income, not from tax-supported Congressional appropriations." But even that is not enough for the I.I.A. It is now urging that N.T.I.S. be dismantled and that its publishing duties be performed by private information firms.

The G.P.O. was also dealt a harsh blow by a provision of the Federal Paperwork Reduction Act, signed into law in December 1980. The act gave the Office of Management and Budget discretion over what publications the G.P.O. should publish. Government documents librarians at that time pointed out the dangers of this arrangement: "To have an entity [O.M.B.] which is typically preoccupied by matters of cost and which is perceived as one of the government agencies least accessible to the public, establishing policies regarding citizen access to government information requires some guarantee of balanced decision-making regarding the collection, management, use and dissemination of information."

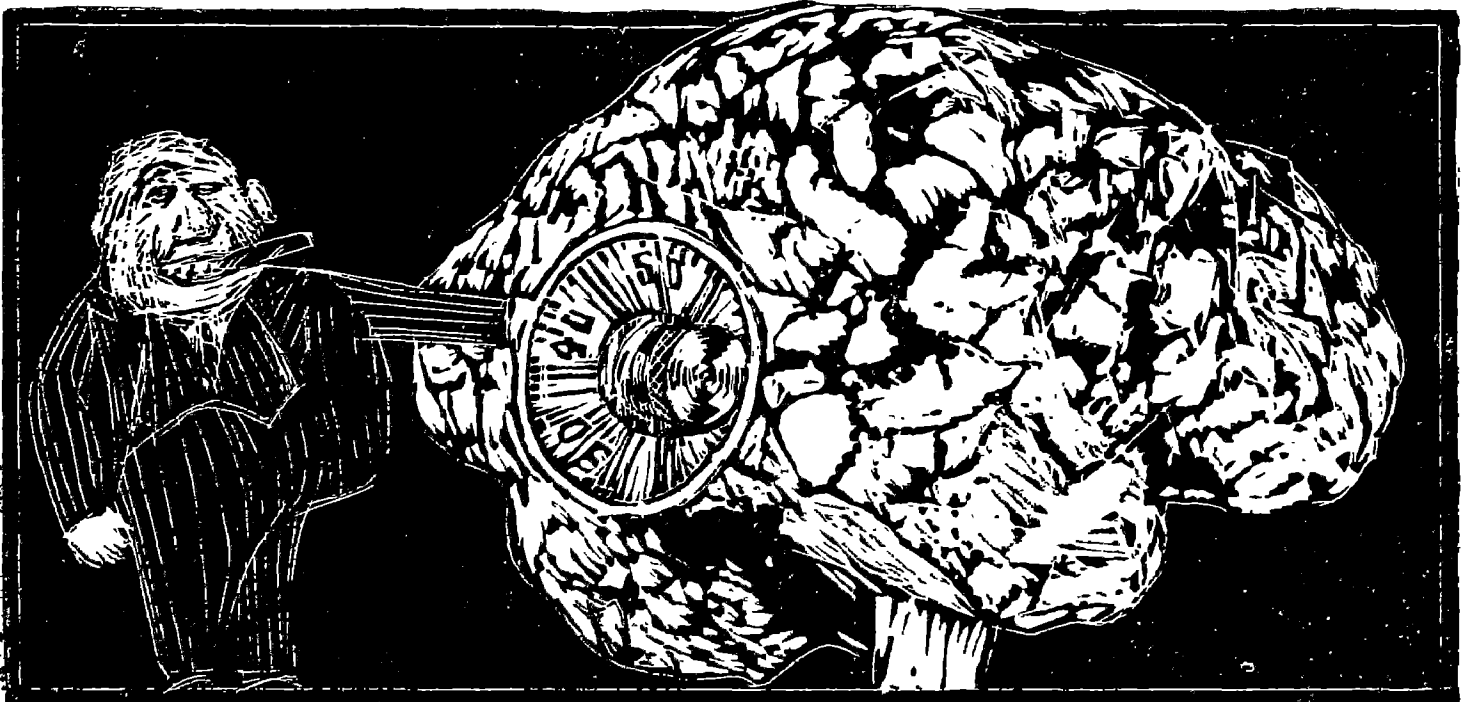
In April 1981, President Reagan and the O.M.B. ordered a moratorium on new periodicals, pamphlets and audiovisual products. In November, it was reported that more than 900 items had been canceled—with more cuts expected this year—many of them concerned with food, diet, health,

energy, social welfare and other matters of daily life.

In January, the Public Printer announced his desire to close twenty-four of the twenty-seven G.P.O. bookstores around the country because, he claimed, they compete with the private sector and are not profitable. The widely distributed monthly release "Selected U.S. Government Publications," issued free by the superintendent of documents of the G.P.O., announced in the same month that its January issue was its last. It offered this consoling alternative: "For those who want more comprehensive information about sales publications, we suggest you subscribe to hard copy *Monthly Catalog of United States Government Publications* (\$90.00 domestic; \$112.50 foreign per calendar year) or the microfiche *GPO Sales Publication Reference File* (\$125.00 domestic; \$156.25 foreign per year)." The justification the G.P.O. gave for terminating this useful tool was that it was not self-sustaining as the law requires. That is another instance of the I.I.A.'s success in having laws interpreted in a way that facilitates the destruction of public information.

The efforts of the private information industry are not limited to crippling the G.P.O. Information firms have been trying to compel the National Library of Medicine to impose higher fees for the use of its computerized information services. The I.I.A. helped force the National Institute of Mental Health to phase out access to its database, which had been available at relatively low cost and included material on social aspects of mental health literature not available elsewhere. (Although this phase-out has been attributed to budgetary cutbacks, it had also been sought by such groups as the I.I.A., which accused the institute of competing with a private operation.)

There has also been increasing pressure on the National Depository Library System to introduce market forces in making acquisitions for the more than 1,300 libraries it serves. In existence for more than a hundred years, the



depository system "provides for a class of libraries in the United States in which certain Government publications are deposited for the use of the public."

The I.I.A. has urged replacing this arrangement with a system of cash payments by which depositories could choose privately prepared information packages. Under that plan, however, there is no guarantee that any depository would maintain the comprehensiveness of its collection, and they would all be subject to a wide variety of competing interests. If they succumbed to corporate blandishments, that would have the effect of encouraging more and more firms to privatize more and more information. To date, the I.I.A.'s views have not prevailed, but its pressure is unrelenting.

Other government information activities as well are under attack—an attack so heavy that in January the Washington, D.C., office of the American Library Association, in a document titled "Less Access to Less Information By and About the U.S. Government," could point to "what seems to be an emerging pattern of restricting citizen access to government information."

Various censuses, surveys and reports are being discontinued or threatened by budget cuts. The Federal statistical system is in disarray. Crucial national income data are threatened. Compilations by the Social Security Administration of basic data on industrial and occupational classifications of workers may be discontinued. The Federal Trade Commission is considering stopping its quarterly financial reports. The Census Bureau has delayed some population reports, and in February it laid off 500 employees.

Federal data of use to business is also in jeopardy, but here the private sector is eager to help. When the Census Bureau canceled its plans to release reports by zip code, a consortium of large companies was established to buy the computer tapes from the bureau and compile the information for its members.

To be sure, the public interest is being manhandled by the market in many related fields: public mail service is weakened by the switch to electronic mail; cheap and reliable telephone service succumbs to A.T.&T.'s desire to concentrate on trunk lines and computer hardware; commercial television declines as networks sell their most popular programming to pay-TV. Yet the damage in the information sector threatens to be greater and longer-lasting. Once withdrawn from its social context and made into an item for sale, necessary information may just not be available. Not because of censorship, though this is no small concern, but because it will be controlled by the marketplace. Information we should have or might need may never be gathered, much less organized and transmitted. And if it is, it will have to be purchased.

With the destruction of public information, the basis of democracy disappears. In the new era, the upper tier is for the "information rich," more abundantly supplied with images, symbols and information than ever before. Below, in the pit, are the "information poor," the "have nots" in the Information Society. Democratic participation in the processes of government will surely suffer. □

Protest

(Continued From Front Cover)

ministration's policies. Religious, student, civil rights and civil liberties groups are beginning to stir in opposition to Reagan's foreign and domestic policies. These groups were crucial in past movements, and they are likely to be important again, for their organizing resources and networks are formidable and their influence on public opinion considerable. Moreover, memories of the civil rights struggle and of the protests against the war in Southeast Asia are still fresh, and the participants from those movements are still very much alive.

Organized labor will be important. True, many on the left are disappointed with the past performance of a union leadership grown increasingly conservative. But its conservatism was encouraged by steady economic improvement, which kept rank-and-file members relatively satisfied. That leadership is likely to be radicalized by the pressure of a rank and file indignant over rising unemployment, provocative antiunion Federal policies and intense corporate efforts to roll back earlier wage and workplace victories. Moreover, the unions also have a substantial stake in social programs, for a number of these programs protect their unemployed members. Unions in the low-wage service sector also have reason to fight the effort to flood the labor market with welfare mothers and the disabled.

The aged, too, are an important oppositional constituency. When Reagan successfully pressed Congress to abolish the monthly minimum Social Security payment of \$122 in the summer of 1981, the organized aged protested and Congress restored it. Moreover, the aged have a stake in protecting programs other than Social Security and Medicare. The aged poor benefit from about 40 percent of Medicaid expenditures, 33 percent of food stamp expenditures and a significant portion of housing subsidies.

There is reason to believe that women will also become a significant oppositional force. Female political values tip to the side of peace, greater equality and economic security. Until recently, women have not been free enough of men to act on those values, even at the moment of casting a secret ballot. But in the 1980 elections, a gap of 8.5 percent appeared by sex, with women showing greater opposition to Reagan on matters of foreign policy, militarization, equality and the social programs. Bella Abzug called attention to the significance of this gap [see "Forming a Real Women's Bloc," *The Nation*, November 28, 1981], which held across class, religious and racial lines:

Although the press made much of Reagan's having won the blue-collar vote, 50 percent of female blue-collar workers voted for Carter, and only 43 percent for Reagan. Reagan

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