

Will the Cancer “Information Explosion”
Produce Another Government Boondoggle
or a Boon for Scientists?

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At this moment, two Americans are “lurching” around on the surface of the moon. (How else does one describe that peculiarly floating hop-skip-and-jump moon-walkers use?) It is a special characteristic of American adaptability (or is it universally human) that this stunning accomplishment of American technology, once considered almost unimaginable, is now “old-hat”.

To an information scientist, the space program will always have a special significance. The so-called “information explosion” was ignited when the USSR launched its Sputnik. In those days we were telling people that if information readily available were better utilized, such events would not come as a big surprise.

The “information explosion” is, of course, a myth. There never was a definable point in time when the flow of information suddenly

clogged the traditional dissemination channels. But in that characteristic megalomania that says we Americans must excel in all things, Congress demanded an explanation of Sputnik--why had we not known about it? So it was convenient to blame our information systems in science and technology.

The information “crisis” released enormous amounts of energy--Congressional hearings and voluminous committee and subcommittee reports, endless articles in the scientific and lay press, etc. Suddenly, the situation of every working scientist in the country seemed desperate. In general, scientists took little part in all this, and kept on working. And, as we have seen, somehow managed to merit Nobel prizes galore for their efforts.

Sputnik undoubtedly did a great deal to make us information-

conscious, but in the long run the furor had little lasting effect on real-life information systems. Any viable change or improvement of scientific and technological information systems must involve scientists themselves. Change must find root in their own realization of need, and in the establishment of information use as part of their research routine and day-to-day scientific method.

Undoubtedly, given the power and authority, I could "improve" the use of scientific information in this country and abroad overnight. But no one has offered me dictatorship in the matter, which I might once have accepted when inspired by the enthusiasm and idealism of youth. Today, I doubt I would accept it if it were offered. The pluralism of our society can be maddeningly obstructive to one with a clear goal in mind, but that pluralism asks not only for proof of the usefulness of one's

goals, but also for proof of one's dedication in pursuing them. What I do resent is the unfair methods my competitors employ to establish their own form of dictatorial power.

It is not coincidental that at this very moment, when the last Apollo mission is nearing its completion, the NIH has just announced an RFP for a large-scale system to deal with an International Cancer Research Information Service. (RFP is government jargon for "Request for Proposal.") In our anxiety to cure cancer, will we once again squander millions on hypothetically interesting information systems, or will we, as was not the case at NASA, let the individual scientist determine what his needs are, and let him choose from a variety of systems, derived from a pluralistic information industry, working in an atmosphere of creative competition? That, in fact, is the way science seems to work best.