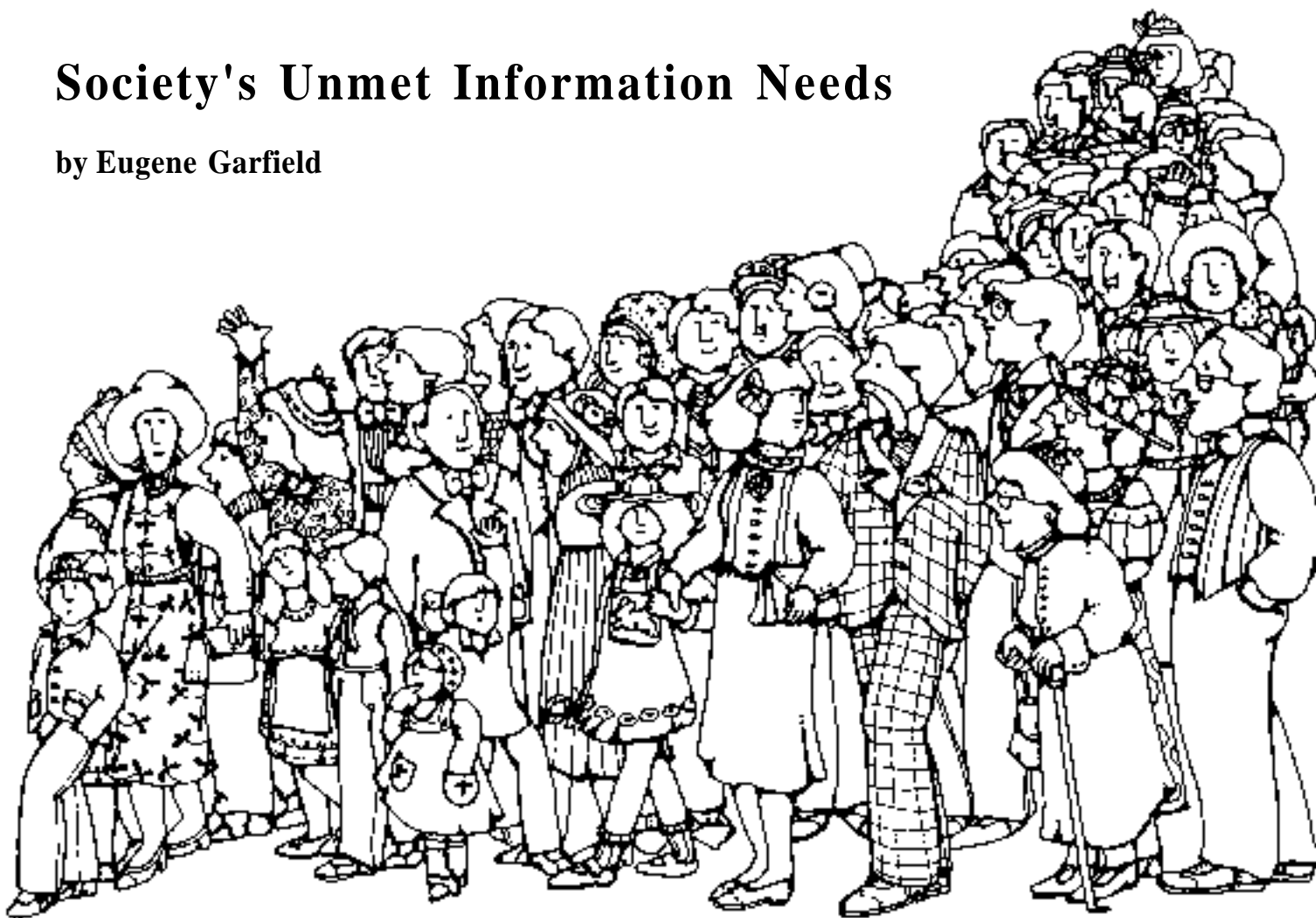


Society's Unmet Information Needs

by Eugene Garfield



TELEPHONE NUMBERS · HOW TO DO IT · WHERE TO BUY IT · MEDICAL ADVICE ·
REPAIRS · PUBLIC FACILITIES · TRANSPORTATION · REAL ESTATE · AUTOMOBILES
· HOSPITAL SERVICES · BUS ROUTES · INTEREST GROUPS · CUSTOMERS · PARKS

After watching 20 years of unprecedented developments in computer and telecommunications technology, it is depressing to realize how little of that know-how is applied to everyday problems.

Eugene Garfield is President of the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The challenge he presents to information professionals in this paper was originally made at the ASIS Annual Meeting in 1984. A year later, on the threshold of ASIS 85, Garfield's challenge to become "the conscience of information science" remains provocative and topical.

Where are all the improvements we were promised to help us locate a taxi or even a public toilet? The information revolution is here, but we have only begun to talk about using information to deal with these everyday problems.

It is our responsibility as information scientists not only to instruct society in the technology that is available but also to identify the problems that need to be solved. Every profession must have a conscience.

Our ability to have a major impact on the challenges before us is significantly reduced by a too-narrow view or vision of our role. We must take an

outward and integrative view of major information issues.

Information is more widely recognized as a natural resource in the postindustrial era, but we must not confuse our stockpiles of information riches with access to them. We have large pockets of information poverty and deprivation within an otherwise affluent society.

Galbraith's term "the affluent society" is rarely heard anymore, possibly because of the series of recessions the U.S. economy has suffered since the phrase was coined. Nor are we more comfortable with terms like the "post-industrial society" of Bell, or the

"knowledge-production society" of Machlup, or even the "information-conscious society" of Garfield.

None of these terms connotes affluence. We all tacitly assumed, however, that as we solved our information problems we would also solve our economic problems. The advent of the information society implied an affluent society for all.

Information *does* have the potential for solving problems of poverty, not only because information is inherently economic but also because poverty is rooted in ignorance. Lack of social, legal, and technological information exacerbates poverty.

The poor and underprivileged constitute a vast information "market" waiting to be served, but the question remains, "Who pays?" ASIS, as the conscience of information science, must provide answers to such questions.

Professional Neglect

Our information-rich society neglects statistical information activities. In an interview with *OMNI* magazine, Wassily Leontief, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, said, "We are living in an information age without information.

"Washington is gutting the government's statistics. They are cutting appropriations. Next year we will know less about the American economy than we knew last year. We cannot effectively take advantage of modern computers, which enable us to deal with masses of information, because we haven't got the information.

"The United States is the only advanced industrial country that does not have a real, central statistical office to collect facts and figures."

Information is the key to individual and personal survival. Of course, one can survive, after a fashion, without information. If you want to toil on a cooperative, back-to-nature farm somewhere, you may not miss today's hectic information environment. Indeed, that might be what you are attempting to escape.

But this is survival of a special kind. You may soon realize, like the migrant

farm workers, that rural life in America is not a garden of Eden. Even the poorest farmer today realizes the value of television for both private pleasure and information. In the June 1984 *ASIS Bulletin* Betty Peters said, "Rural America does not want to be left out." Neither do the poor or the handicapped.

Practical Needs

Some years ago, I demonstrated how difficult and painful it could be to obtain information of even the most basic kind. I described the case of a poor woman in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, who was trying to locate the local legal aid society. She could not find it because it was listed in her telephone directory alphabetically under Cambria County Legal Aid Society.

After 14 years, the appropriate cross-reference has still not been created. You still cannot find a listing under Legal Aid Society.

As a more up-to-date example of information frustration, consider the case of a recently arrived immigrant who tries to obtain information about instruction in English as a second language.

I recently spent over an hour assembling information for a foreign-born friend. Through perseverance I eventually learned, via the Young Men's Hebrew Association, about a language tutorial service provided by the Nationalities Service Center of Philadelphia.

Why was this service not known to the information people at the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service? Why not at the Adult Education Division of the Philadelphia School System?"

Information professionals have a marvelous opportunity to use the most elemental methods to identify information requirements of all citizens. In fact, identifying the unmet information needs of society ought to be the prime responsibility of governmental agencies interested in promoting the widest possible use of information facilities.

However, in spite of our failure to systematically identify the most basic information needs of society, we have arrived at the Information-Conscious Society.

The *ad hoc* methods of the entrepreneur have successfully identified many important areas of need, but the infor-

mation industry, has still only scratched the surface of what is to come.

Opportunity and Responsibility

For example, the public's right to know or to access information is a critical area where professional leadership has been absent.

Consider the history of the right-to-know movement in Philadelphia. In 1970, the Philadelphia Area Project on Occupational Safety and Health, a union-sponsored group, and Ralph Nader's Health Research Group petitioned the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for a regulation to require employers to inform employees about hazardous substances in the workplace.

Right-to-know remained a matter of unexercised bureaucratic discretion, however, until 1979, when a group of Philadelphia residents organized the Bridesburg Civic Council to improve the quality of air in their heavily industrialized community.

The Council organized community meetings to inform citizens of possible connections between pollution and public health, since the cancer death rate in Bridesburg was twice that for the U.S. as a whole.

Ultimately, the Philadelphia right-to-know ordinance was enacted on January 22, 1981, and its impact was national in scope.

Approximately 18 states and 30 local communities have now enacted similar laws. OSHA has issued its own form of right-to-know regulations, although in a weaker and more limited form than most local and state laws.

All this took place, however, without the benefit of guidance or advice from ASIS.

We, as information professionals, must be willing to adapt to new terms, new conditions, new tools. In short, we must adapt to the new Information-Conscious world that has arrived.

Only then will we be able to handle more than the need for researchers to engage in academic polemics. We will be able to step out and face the challenges of our Information Society.