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Reconstructing a Vision: May a Consolidated Legal Information Service be Achieved, and What Requirements Should a Professional Service Meet?

This intervention is based on a brief discussion of what happened to the American JURIS system. This was an early legal information service launched by the US Department of Justice, the “Justice retrieval and inquiry system” – an agreement between the US Department of Justice and the Bundesministerium der Justiz let both organisations operate computerised services with identical acronyms.

JURIS was mainly developed for in-house use by the many attorneys associated with the Department of Justice. But it was ambitious, and through co-operation with the FLITE service of the Air Force, the US statutes were made available. This led to co-operation with West, the largest US legal publisher, which published the US Code on contract with the government. West maintained a system of case reports, and added their own copyrighted head-notes to the decisions. West licensed this material to JURIS.

In the early 1990s, requests were made under the freedom of information legislation to have material from JURIS made available to the public. This was denied, and in the following discussion West announced that it would not renew its license to the Department of Justice. This announcement was followed within days by the announcement that JURIS itself would be discontinued, the Department of Justice in the future relying on commercial services.

There are issues to be considered in the wake of this story.

One may reflect on the pricing policy of West, making its service very expensive at the same time having a virtual monopoly on the publishing of large parts of the legal sources. Or one may reflect on whether the freedom of information legislation at all applies to legal sources – though sources may be administrative decisions (as some of the memoranda from the Department of Justice to its attorneys). Or one may reflect on the difference between a service satisfying *publication legis* and a service adequate for professional lawyers.