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Free Access to Law: What is Still Ahead?

The Free Access to Law-Movement has been very successful. Nowadays free access to law in the Internet is the normal situation and no longer an exception. This leads to the question, whether important tasks still have to be accomplished. The paper is arguing that this is the case and that without the further steps explained the complete situation might be endangered.

The necessary actions to be taken include among others:

1. A guarantee for the online law text:

   Many Internet law publications (if not the majority) still carry a disclaimer stating that only an official printed edition is authentic and valid. This has to be changed, because otherwise a trustworthy use of the online materials is impossible.

2. A timely update of online law texts:

   In many cases serious delays can be observed between the coming into force of new legal provisions and the electronic follow up. This again causes a problem of trust.

3. A change of the access-paradigm:

   The idea of access implies that the citizens go to search the law to which they have access. This paradigm should be transformed into a delivery paradigm: The law is delivered to citizens in a framework structured by them. The basic idea is well known (from "pull" to "push"), but not yet realized adequately in free access Internet law systems.

It can easily be seen that tasks no. 1 and 2 can be accomplished by legal and technical measures leading to an official online publication of the law. Task no. 3 can be realized by implementing adequate web-services based on Semantic Web-technologies.

All this is in reach. But if we go a step further, we find that access to texts of law does not necessarily guarantee an understanding of those texts. Unaccompanied access might even be a reason for misunderstanding. This fact induces the responsibility to complement the legal texts offered for free access with basic explanatory materials. This is the real challenge, if we want to make the content of the law "accessible" in the true sense of the word. Coping with this challenge requires a joint effort of all parties responsible for the creation, explanation and "translation" of the law.