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ROBERTA NANNUCCI, MARIO RAGONA

ITTIG/CNR, Italy

Towards Free Access to Law: Research Experiences and Prospects

The research world involved in the development and dissemination of legal data banks from the very beginning focused its attention on how these systems could be used by the widespread public of the Internet: since its origin the net immediately appeared as a powerful democracy tool capable of making the technological community closer to non expert citizens.

By means of new ICT technologies implemented for making documents related to different law sources available to the public a set of support tools were built moving towards free access but trying at the same time to make the use of these data banks easier and more friendly. Free access demonstrated to be an excellent means of open and democratic approach, but practically insufficient for a fruitful exploitation by expert and non expert stakeholders of materials which are by their nature scarcely comprehensible.

A more than twenty years old experience of a research institute is described here, enriched also by its participation to a great variety of national and international projects, within the scope of free access (bibliographies, databases) or aiming at experimenting and developing semantic-oriented supporting tools such as classifications, thesauri and ontologies or content-oriented tools such as guides and aids.

Some strategic guidelines derive from this experience aiming at developing an effective service capable of meeting the needs of a widespread audience such as Internet stakeholders. It is worthwhile to keep on free access, which is widespread but not yet completed on all law sources, but also to devote still a lot of energies to develop tools able to support effectively the comprehensiveness of legal materials. In this way free access will not be a mere empty expression, but will correspond to a real and effective right to legal information access.