LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES IN
SHARING INFORMATION THROUGH DISTRIBUTED DATABASES

Harlan J. Onsrud

ABSTRACT

As large databases are developed and societal control over them is adjusted through institutional and legal mechanisms, social issues likely to loom large include concerns for privacy, freedom of information, confidentiality, work product protection, and legal liability. In each of these areas, existing laws and restrictions were formulated to uphold policies which society either supports or has chosen to live with. In promoting more efficient handling and widespread sharing of information we are inviting conflict with the existing framework of laws and the underlying power balance among institutions which those laws support.

This paper identifies rules of law and institutional practices which may be acting as significant impediments to the widespread use of large scale databases and suggests steps towards reducing some of those impediments.