

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

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Essential Information is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization that provides information to the public on important topics neglected by the mass media and policymakers. It publishes a monthly magazine, books and reports, sponsors investigative journalism conferences, provides writers and citizen activists with grants to pursue investigations and various projects and operates clearinghouses which disseminate information to grassroots organizations in the United States and the Third World. These projects are designed to encourage citizens to become active and engaged in their communities.

One of the main thrusts of Essential Information's work is assembling and disseminating information in unique ways — through publishing books, reports and magazines, via the Internet, and through conferences and seminars. The following list of strategic information projects highlights our approach and accomplishments.

I. INFORMATION: THE CURRENCY OF DEMOCRACY:

- **Internet Outreach.** Even at this early stage in the evolution of the Internet, it is clear that new electronic technologies are profoundly changing American democracy and culture. What remains uncertain is the long-term character of those changes. Will the new civic and cultural spaces being created online enhance the ideals of Jeffersonian democracy and consumer sovereignty? Or will they usher in a new regime of hyper-commercialism, corporate concentration, privacy invasions and practices that diminish the possibilities of citizenship?

Because the Internet and associated computer innovations are so novel and complex, many nonprofit organizations do not appreciate how they could greatly improve their effectiveness. The technical complexities are daunting, the costs are considerable, and the benefits are often perceived as speculative.

Essential Information has stepped forward to address these problems and facilitate the migration of democratic participation to the online world. We believe that relatively small investments can leverage huge gains for citizen groups and individual advocates. But these investments must be strategically selected and skillfully implemented. They must bridge the vexing "culture gap" separating people conversant with computers and the Internet on the one hand, and people skilled in advancing a political or policy agenda. Given our long experience in the art of citizen action and our technical sophistication in cutting-edge Internet technologies, we believe we can bridge this gap and help more nonprofit groups become more effective "online citizens."

Essential Information has pioneered the use of the Internet for public interest groups. We have built an impressive infrastructure of computer networking systems, assembled a talented group of Internet-savvy activists; reached out to more than five dozen nonprofit citizen groups to direct Internet services and assistance; demonstrated novel, effective ways to combine citizen action with electronic networking; and donated computer mapping software worth hundreds of thousands of dollars to community groups across the country and trained them in using the powerful technology to visually demonstrate discriminatory practices by financial institutions. Already we can see a diffusion of results from the work that Essential Information innovated in the early 1990s. Essential's web page (<http://www.essential.org/>) hosts our work as well as that of dozens of public interest groups.

- **Appraising Microsoft Conference.** In November 1997, Essential Information co-sponsored the first major conference to critically evaluate the practices of Microsoft, the software company that maintains a 90 percent share in the computer operating systems market. The conference brought together hundreds of consumers, academics, public interest advocates, software developers, computer industry competitors, members of the news media and others to debate how Microsoft's business practices impact competition, innovation and consumer well-being. The conference received coverage in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, Associated Press, Reuters and newspapers across the country and throughout the world. It was a leading topic in dozens of popular and trade computer journals, newsletters and electronic publications. Conference proceedings can be accessed using RealAudio at: <http://www.appraising-microsoft.org/day1rm.html>. Essential Information is following up the conference with meetings with antitrust enforcement officials, government procurement officers and government and industry whistleblowers.

- **The *Multinational Monitor*.** Published since 1978, the *Multinational Monitor* is a singular resource tracking the international behavior of multinational corporations -- in the realms of the environment, labor rights, indigenous rights and consumer well-being -- particularly in the Third World. Through its exposés and sharp editorial focus, the *Monitor* reaches an influential readership and serves as a pacesetter for the mainstream press. The *Monitor* received the Utne Reader Alternative Media Award for Best International Reporting in 1990, and is regularly featured by Project Censored, the national media research group.

- **Multinational Resource Center.** The Third World finds itself victimized by the worst abuses of multinational corporations; at the same time, Third World residents usually have limited access to even the most basic information about corporations and corporate activities. The Clearinghouse provides information to Third World workers, environmental and consumer groups and local journalists on the history of multinational companies, effective approaches for dealing with multinationals and the health and environmental problems associated with products and processes.

Fellowships. In addition to providing crucial information about companies to activists, the Resource Center also provides small grants in direct support of Third World activists so that they can focus on organizing and advocacy work. In exchange, the Resource Center relies on the fellows to share their experiences and to provide information about matters which are of interest

to activists elsewhere. The Resource Center has funded fellowships in Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and the former Soviet Union.

Activities of the international fellows range from an activist in Malaysia who is working with local indigenous groups fighting against timber barons to a doctor in Pakistan who is advocating a rational policy governing the import of pharmaceuticals, from a writer/activist in the Philippines who is advocating for traditional and more globally sustainable lifestyles that Filipinos have followed for centuries to a Russian environmentalist who is developing organic farming techniques for Russian farmers as an alternative to destructive chemical fertilizers.

Internships. The Resource Center provides internships in Washington, D.C. that offer training in advocacy skills and substantive issues to budding activists. We plan to host two interns, each for three months, two times a year. We have previously had very positive experiences with interns from many countries, including India, South Africa, Ethiopia and Namibia. We helped the interns sharpen their research and advocacy skills to promote social justice through citizen action in their own communities. The interns are able to associate with a broad spectrum of organizers, lawyers, writers and researchers. And the interns have been invaluable to us, providing first-hand knowledge of the day-to-day functions of governments and organizations in their countries.

- **Freedom of Information Act Project.** The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is one of the most important tools available to citizens to gain an understanding of government and corporate activity. Essential Information files FOIA requests regularly. The subjects range from the FAA's information on major airline pilot complaints to the FDA's foreign seafood inspection reports, along with a number of FOIAs filed with the FBI and the CIA on various national and international figures. Future FOIA requests will cover subjects related to the environment, consumer product and drug safety, worker health and safety, civil rights, women's rights, labor relations and aspects of U.S. foreign policy.

II. ESSENTIAL ACTION:

Essential Action is the international corporate accountability campaigning arm of Essential Information. We are currently operating three campaigns:

- **Boycott Shell/Free Nigeria.** Oil accounts for more than 80 percent of the despotic Nigerian government's income, and Shell, through its Nigerian subsidiary, is responsible for more than half of Nigeria's crude oil output. Drilling for oil causes pollution, and major drilling operations are frequently major causes of pollution. But Shell's operations in Nigeria are ecologically disgraceful even by the already depressed standards of the industry worldwide. Much of the worst devastation has occurred in Ogoniland, home to the Ogoni people. That devastation and social inequities led Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People to organize a strong movement against Shell and the Nigerian government -- a movement which achieved enormous success, and ultimately led to Saro-Wiwa's execution.

While a host of groups are focused on urging Congress to adopt economic sanctions against Nigeria, Essential Action is leading the grassroots effort to put pressure on Shell, the company which fuels the Nigerian dictatorship. Essential Action is organizing community groups and

students across the country, distributing educational material, hosting the leading e-mail discussion list on Shell and Nigeria, working with the media, organizing protests, arranging speaking tours and staging a assortment of other activities designed to promote the Shell boycott and support the democratic struggle in Nigeria.

- **The Campaign Against Medical Waste Incinerators.** The newest chapter in the sad tale of dirty technology exports to the Third World involves medical waste incinerators. Medical waste incinerators are one of the leading sources of dioxin creation in the United States. In the United States and other industrialized countries, they are coming under increasingly stringent environmental regulations, and are slowly being phased out, to be replaced by more environmentally friendly technologies, such as autoclaving (steam sterilization) and microwaving.

Industries do not like to be phased out. With aggressive assistance from the World Bank and government agencies, the medical waste industry has turned its attention south, trying to market products in the Third World that it can no longer sell in the industrialized world. This is particularly worrisome, because the environmental regulations which limit the hazards of medical waste incineration in a country like the United States are, by and large, not going to be applied in countries like Senegal. And it is particularly troubling, because there are safer and cheaper alternatives available.

Essential Action is notifying public health and environmental groups around the world of the hazards of medical waste incineration, and alerting groups in more than a dozen countries of World Bank plans to support medical waste incinerators in their countries. In India, where Essential Action and its Indian partners have the most evolved medical waste incineration campaign, hospitals are now actively considering alternatives to medical waste incineration. In the United States, the campaign has prompted a World Bank review of its support for medical waste incinerators.

- **Taking on Tobacco.** Three million people die from tobacco use each year, more than half in the developing world. By the year 2020, 10 million will die annually from tobacco use, 70 percent in developing countries.

Tobacco use is rising rapidly in Third World countries, largely due to the marketing efforts of U.S. tobacco companies Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds, along with British-American Tobacco. Already the major U.S. companies earn half their profits from foreign sales and sell two-thirds of their cigarettes in overseas markets. Those proportions will grow substantially in the coming years, as smoking rates tail off in the United States.

Essential Action is one of very few U.S. groups to focus on the foreign operations of Big Tobacco, even though overseas sales make up the bulk of the tobacco companies' business. Essential Action has been the leading critic of the effect of the proposed "global settlement" with the tobacco companies on foreign countries. Essential Action drafted and circulated a protest letter criticizing the deal which was signed by most of the world's leading tobacco control campaigners, has undertaken the most detailed analysis of the effect of the deal on international tobacco control efforts and helped create the political climate in which Congress passed

legislation limiting the ability of U.S. government agencies to promote the interests of U.S. tobacco companies abroad.

III. OTHER ESSENTIAL INFORMATION PROJECTS

- **Geographic Information Systems.** We have launched an exciting new project which uses Geographic Information Systems (GIS). GIS is a computer hardware and software system that allows users to use geographically referenced data to produce maps, reports and statistical summaries. Our goal is to publish a series of "views" that graphically represent problems dealing with environment, health, consumer, electoral and poverty issues. Ultimately, we envision producing a yearly almanac of views covering a broad spectrum of issues.
- **The Bank Research Project.** The Banking Research Project is preparing three reports on banking regulation. The first report employs a computer-assisted analysis of one million Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA) records and GIS mapping to examine discrimination in mortgage lending. The report will provide community groups and civil rights organizations with new techniques for analyzing HMDA data to identify lending institutions that warrant in-depth Fair Lending investigation. The second report will examine how various structural changes in the banking sector -- e.g., the rise of interstate banking, increased banking concentration and the growth of non-bank credit institutions -- have adversely impacted consumer, small business and local community access to credit and other banking services. The third report will focus on the importance of maintaining strong prudential regulation of the banking sector. Even amidst the continuing taxpayer bailout of the federal deposit insurance funds, the banking industry is aggressively lobbying the Clinton Administration for a major relaxation of prudential regulation.
- **Alternative Careers.** The Alternative Careers Recruitment Project informs students about, and matches students with, alternative career opportunities, and exposes college placement officers to career possibilities with social change organizations.

IV. A SAMPLING OF BOOKS AND REPORTS SPONSORED BY ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

- ***Aid For Dependent Corporations.*** This survey, by Jim Donahue, exposed the subsidies and tax breaks that corporations receive from the federal government as compared to the amount spent for social welfare programs.
- ***Civics for Democracy: A Journey for Teachers and Students.*** This book, written by Katherine Isaac, is a primer on the history of citizen movements in the United States and techniques of citizen action. In addition, Civics for Democracy contains ten activity guides for developing civic skills and improving communities.
- ***Corporate Reapers: The Agribusiness Almanac.*** Written by A.V. Krebs, one of the nation's leading agribusiness experts, this book details the transformation of farming in the post-war period. Corporate Reapers shows how the huge grain companies, banks and government policy

have worked to destroy the nation's family farm system. Covering all aspects of the nation's agriculture system, this book makes a unique contribution to our understanding of the forces driving U.S. farm policy.

- ***Good Works: A Guide to Social Change Careers.*** Good Works offers the most comprehensive listing of social change organizations and job opportunities in the country. Now in its fifth edition, Good Works is enthusiastically received by graduating college students and earns especially high praise from college career counselors.
- ***The Haiti Files: Decoding the Crisis.*** The Haiti Files, by James Ridgeway, political columnist for the Village Voice, squarely addresses the current crisis in Haiti, and places it in the context of the longstanding U.S. role in Haiti's political and economic life. This book draws together reports, original documents, secret memos and testimony as well as articles by a broad range of journalists and scholars that may not have been heard had it not been for the production of this book.
- ***Masks of Deception: Corporate Front Groups in America.*** Published in December 1991, this Essential Information report, written by Mark Megalli and Andy Friedman, exposes the proliferation of corporate front groups. These groups use misleading names that imply they work in the public interest when they really put forth a corporate agenda. This report received coverage in USA Today, New York Newsday, The Washington Post, The Washington Times and The Wall Street Journal.
- ***Poletown: Community Betrayed.*** This book, written by Jeanie Wylie, chronicles the decimation of Detroit's "Poletown" community. Over 3,000 residents lost their homes when the neighborhood was razed to accommodate the construction of a General Motors factory. Poletown details the efforts of the Poles and blacks who fought side by side to save their neighborhood, one of the city's oldest integrated communities.
- ***Racial Redlining: A Study of Racial Discrimination by Banks and Mortgage Companies in the United States.*** This study, by Jon Brown and Charles Bennington, examines the issue of racial redlining by major mortgage lenders in the nation's larger metro areas. Our study, which received nationwide media coverage, prompted Attorney General Janet Reno to investigate the 49 major lenders that have been engaging in this practice.
- ***Shortchanging the Viewers.*** Essential Information's 1989 study, *Shortchanging the Viewers: Broadcaster's Neglect of Public Interest Broadcasting*, shows that the elimination of the Federal Communications Commission's public interest programming guidelines contributed to a sharp decline in issue-oriented, public affairs programming. Representative Edward Markey, D-Mass., says the study reveals the "intellectual bankruptcy of the F.C.C.'s policy." *Shortchanging the Viewers* received coverage in The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times and Broadcasting Magazine.
- ***Silent Violence, Silent Death.*** Written by Harvey Rosenfield, with a preface by Ralph Nader, this book teaches consumers how to avoid medical malpractice (which is already at epidemic

levels). *Silent Violence, Silent Death* takes a comprehensive look at how Americans fare under the current health care system.

- ***Talking Heads: A Look at the Popular and Influential News Commentators.*** This book, written by Alan Hirsch, looks critically at the biased and vacuous content of television's political talk shows. Based on extensive interviews with the top TV political commentators – ranging from William Buckley to John McLaughlin to Michael Kinsley – *Talking Heads* makes a cogent case for how opinion and news shows are selling the public short and sheds light on the way personalities determine what U.S. citizens see on television each week.
- ***Women Activists: Challenging the Abuse of Power.*** This book, by Anne Witte Garland, offers portraits of nine American women who lived ordinary lives until they were moved to respond to dangers plaguing their communities.
- ***Workers At Risk: A Survey of OSHA's Enforcement Record Against the 50 Largest U.S. Corporations.*** Written by James Donahue, *Workers at Risk* reveals the soft prosecution of workplace safety violations by OSHA. In a single 14-year period, OSHA recorded 418 workers deaths and 723 injuries at the top 50 U.S. manufacturing corporations. The average fine for each safety violation was \$674 – small incentive to improve the workers' environment. This report received coverage in USA Today.