NATIONAL INFORMATION POLICY —
SOME BASIC CONSIDERATIONS†

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Abstract

Recognizing the value of information as an asset to national development, this paper attempts to identify the need of a coordinated national information policy, identify an appropriate definition among many connotations, and explore related issues in a broad sense with succinct descriptions of American, Australian, British, Indian, and Western European countries' view points and their pertinent endeavors.

Attention is directed to some of the basic considerations involved in developing such a policy, especially those relevant to the formulation of national information policy in the Republic of China.

Analysis of the ROC information-related efforts and brief recommendations are presented with discussions on some of the basic considerations such as centralized leadership, hierarchical upgrading of responsible sub-units, participation of public and private sectors, standardization issues, and comprehensive, continuous, and coordinated efforts.


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INTRODUCTION

While the world has already stepped into the “Post-Industrial Society,” the society is built upon a sophisticated, information-based and capital-intensive production system, people gradually come to appreciate that information is viewed both as power and wealth.

Similar to that of the American society as depicted by Peter Drucker, the world has changed rapidly from an economy of pure goods to a knowledge economy, we thus have entered a so-called information age in which information is a chief ingredient of knowledge.

The advent of computer and communication technology has certainly prompted human beings entering into this revolutionary age of information. This was evidenced by the fact that over 60% of the United States work force is involved in information-related jobs and there has been a worldwide increase of information workers from 10 to 60 million during the last decade. Continuous increase of information, speedy innovation of information technology, and overall dependence upon information have enhanced the need for many national leaders to react to the needs generated by these dynamic phenomena.

Information, being instrumental to productivity, to modernization of society, and to the well-being of any individual or group, serves as the foundation for national development and policy making. “A country’s creativity, its visions, and insights, are fueled by the analysis of information and data.” UNESCO has long stressed that information is now considered as a vital resource for national development.

Treating information as a nation’s vital resource, constant creation, collection, processing, dissemination, transferring, availability, access, analysis, and utilization of information are indispensable for efforts in national development. Cognizance of the value of information is especially true in countries which are confronted with both internal and international crises.
As identified by Victor Rosenberg, most nations assume that information activities are essential or at least significantly contribute to their economic growth.\(^8\) The importance of information has gained worldwide recognition; it is certainly the case in the Republic of China.

**THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL INFORMATION POLICY**

While the value of information is ascertained so affirmatively, the most effective collection, processing, dissemination, transferring, availability, access, analysis, and utilization of information depend greatly upon a workable, long-range, multi-faceted national information policy. “Throughout the world policymakers are establishing national policies to promote their information industries and to protect against potential negative effects on the information age.”\(^9\) “Information is at the very heart of public policy”, stated by Hubert H. Humphrey, illustrates the prominent position of information policy in the United States;\(^10\) Universally, attention to national information policy is indeed on the upswing. All these concerns indicate that only with a well thought out and coordinated national information policy, can a nation really benefit from information.

**CONNOTATIONS AND DEFINITION**

The term “information policy” has many connotations depending upon different viewpoints and various interpretations: “To some, it is that body of statutes and regulations that governs the telecommunications industry. To others, it is concerned with the issues of privacy and freedom of information. To still others, it is those laws and policies affecting libraries and government printing and publication.”\(^11\)

As identified by the National Commission on Libraries and
Information Science, information policy should be a policy which governs the way information affects our society. It deals with various components of information which are interrelated and interdependent.

ISSUES AND BASIC CONSIDERATIONS

The interrelationships and interdependences of the various components of information, which can be seen in communication, technology, economics, privacy of information, and among information management, information networks and information/library science, are indeed key issues confronting us. A sound, comprehensive, and coordinated national information policy, therefore, should be determined with a broad concept and should deal with every facet of information: creation, collection, organization, supplies, processing, dissemination, transfer, and usage. In effectively and successfully formulating a national information policy, centralized high-level leadership, hierarchical upgrading of responsible sub-units, participation of public and private sectors, issues of standards, and comprehensive, continuous, and coordinated efforts are the basic considerations.

SOME NATIONAL INFORMATION POLICY ENDEAVORS

Numerous examples of attempts have been made on the formulation of national information policies throughout the world. Some of them aim at the overall national information policy as a whole; some of them address national library/information services in particular. As illustration of the diversity of the types of national information policy, a few such endeavors are described as follows:

A decade ago in the United States, the Domestic Council Committee on the Right of Privacy was commissioned by the
U.S. President in 1976, to review and to define the information policy issues which confront Federal policymakers, and to ascertain the status of information policy studies then going forward within a number of agencies in the Executive Branch. That was the first serious U. S. attempt to assemble the salient issues with a comprehensive discussion on related issues. This charge resulted in a report – National Information Policy, which emphasized the following needs:\textsuperscript{13}

1) To examine communications regulatory practices, 2) To review copyright law, 3) To clarify the role of public and private sectors in developing computerized data bases and, 4) To establish standards for the interchange of computer information issues pertaining to National Information Policy.

Among many of the endeavors, two American legislative propositions, which address many of the information issues, deserve our attention: 1) H. R. 744 Information Science and Technology Act proposed by Representative George E. Brown, Jr., features the establishment of an Institute for Information Policy and Research to study information science and technology and 2) S 786, Information Age Commission Act calls for the creation of an Information Age Commission to handle related research on the topic.\textsuperscript{14}

In Australia, the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services (AACOBS) has been the moving force in its initiation of a national library/information policy in cooperation with the National Library. Borchardt indicated that national information policy will have to be considered by a statutory authority charged with the execution of a national information policy.\textsuperscript{15} This group emphasized the establishment of norms and standards, the economics of automation, and the measurement of user satisfaction.

In Western Europe, "in none of the Member States does there seem to be a single coherent 'horizontal' information policy."\textsuperscript{16} C. Jansen van Rosendaal, Director, Commission of the European Communities, indicated that this lack of a general
policy framework, both at the national and community levels, is considered by many as a real constraint to the favorable development of the information market. He advocated that "...new rules of the game have to be formulated!"\textsuperscript{17}

L. J. Anthony traced the history of information policy in the United Kingdom back to its genesis in 1963.\textsuperscript{18} In spite of several changes of responsibilities and organizations, the Fourth Report from the Education, Science and Arts Committee, Session 1979–80, made a good move in that it recommended:\textsuperscript{19}

1) As soon as possible the Government should appoint a Minister of Cabinet rank to take responsibility for information policy and should provide him with the necessary staff . . . . 2) The Government should set up, as a matter of urgency, a Standing Commission representative of the wide range of interests . . . . 3) Examine on a continuing basis the problems of developing a national information network to formulate national requirements, to relate them to international developments, to investigate possible solutions, and to make proposals for their implementation by appropriate bodies.

In India, Nagpur University organized an All-India Seminar on National Policy on Library and Information Science in September of 1983, with sessions to discuss the following topics: 1) Need for a national policy and areas to be covered; 2) Levels of training and agencies that should handle it; 3) Bibliographical organization and control in Library/information science; and, 4) Policy for research and training in LIS and monitoring, evaluation and standardization. It concluded by recommending a national policy for library and information services.\textsuperscript{20}

The above are some of the important endeavors in the last decade. All of them do indicate a need for coordinated efforts and an authorized body to handle such a high level venture. Well summarized by Michel J. Menou, most policy papers . . . . tend to proceed from various specialized points of view rather than from a comprehensive and integrated "informationalization" strategy.\textsuperscript{21} This, together with the common lack of appropriate coordination
mechanisms among the many interested Government and private organizations which all countries have inherited from the industrial society, might account for their frequent lack of effectiveness.22

INFORMATION-RELATED EFFORTS IN THE ROC

The public and private sectors of the Republic of China have paid considerable attention to information-related activities/programs. It is most commendable that the efforts in the Republic of China are well under way. The following are some of the highlights of these accomplishments:

1. Under the direction of Drs. K. T. Li and H. T. Chou, Ministers Without-Portfolio in the Executive Yuan, the Information Development and Promotion Task Force has been established with five decentralized working groups: a) Integrated Planning (Research and Development Commission), b) Information Industry (Ministry of Economic Affairs), c) Personnel Training and Recruitment (Ministry of Education), d) Networking Technology (Ministry of Communications) and, e) Evaluation (Auditing Department).23 Among many of its innovative and policymaking endeavors, the most popular program initiated by the Task Force is its annual Information Week/Month, and its annual information technology exhibition which does accomplish many missions. A social consciousness of information and public education/orientation of information industry/technology/science are definitely the applauding results of such a nationwide endeavor.

2. Under the auspices of the Research and Development Commission of the Executive Yuan, six national management information systems created to provide management information to various levels by different organizations consist of:

3. Under the planning of the Council for Cultural Development, Executive Yuan, library/information systems have been developed jointly with the Library Automation Planning Commission, which is organized by the National Central Library in cooperation with the Library Association of China. Library laws, legal supports, community cultural centers and local library information services and policies have been the concerns of the Council for Cultural Development; automated library services and their related standards are the chief concerns of the LAPC.

**OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is most encouraging to note that these three major information-related endeavors, in one way or another, are the responsibilities assumed by the Executive Yuan, which is the highest executive branch of the government in the Republic of China. Each of them has achieved considerable success. However, more coordination among them should be encouraged. Such diversity of efforts does indicate growing attention and developing interest; it also reveals policy fragmentation. More effective handling and retrieval of information resulted from compatibility of computerized information systems, clear identification of public and private participation in information activities, various pertinent but non-redundant standards, and encouraged coordination of efforts within the information environments.

While the Scientific and Technological Information System has the blessings of the Research and Development Commission of the Executive Yuan, at least two separate systems stand out by
themselves, having nothing to do with the national library information system. Between these two systems, compatibility is needed.\textsuperscript{26}

While libraries do constitute an important component of the entire national information network, national information policy should also concern itself with various issues confronting library/information entities.

The National Central Library has an outstanding proposal developed by Director C. K. Wang for national library/information services.\textsuperscript{27} These proposals pertaining to library policies and development need to be considered by the overall national information policy. The national library should be authorized to coordinate and supervise library services at all levels, and the national library, to be elevated to a higher administrative echelon, should be a unit contributing to the process of national information policy making.

We are very much encouraged by the initiatives that the Research and Development Commission of the Executive Yuan has already taken. It has quickly recognized the importance of legal issues confronting information, and has recently completed research on the topic.\textsuperscript{28} This study certainly has provided some background information helpful to move the Republic of China closer to the task of formulating a national information policy.

Because of the uniqueness of each nation, policies should be formulated based on its individuality. However, to adapt a sound idea is to be encouraged: paraphrasing some of the recommendations made by the Domestic Council Committee on the Right of Privacy a decade ago seems to be worthy of our consideration:

1) Identifying the development of a coordinated National Information Policy as a national goal;
2) Refocussing and expanding the current responsibilities of the Task Force of the Executive Yuan by formally charging it to coordinate and consolidate functions of several existing
entities and to upgrade the hierarchy of certain responsible entities. This Task Force should be inter-agency in nature, and consist of high-level agency representatives.

3) Creating an advisory committee to assist the Task Force in performance of its duties. This committee must consist of representatives from the private sector, local government, and academic and professional disciplines concerned with information policy issues.

CONCLUSION

A sound, well-rounded, and far-sighted national information policy can only be developed if a top-level executive body is organized, or is given the authority to either coordinate or to consolidate all efforts involved, on a centralized, high-level, and continuing basis.

Only through such efforts, can a rational framework for a national information policy be accurately articulated and coordinately formulated. National library and information service policy can then be logically and effectively derived from the framework of this overall national information policy aimed at treating assorted issues of information communication, information technology, information economics, information privacy, laws pertinent to information related activities, information management, information networks, information/library science services and information education. With the ROC's firm commitments to the information environments, the fruits of a true national information policy are indeed forthcoming.

REFERENCES


17. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
22. Ibid.