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Building on sure foundations: the overlooked dimension of national information policies

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Abstract:

National Information Policy (NIP) proposals from the library profession in New Zealand should in theory fit well with government strategic goals for a “knowledge society”. In reality, national information policy has never been an issue on the “public agenda” in the way in which, for example, environmental policy has been.

What NIP debate there is has now been subsumed by the IT industry who have succeeded in making it an issue of investment in systems and networks, rather than in knowledge content per se.

The accumulated knowledge content of libraries in New Zealand is a national resource. It risks being overlooked as “knowledge society” attention focuses on technologies.

Formal NIPs are of doubtful value given the context of information use in a dynamic mosaic of law, business practice and cultural belief. Together these provide a viable framework for the enterprising creation and use of knowledge and no added-value unique to a formal national information policy has been demonstrated.

“The knowledge wave” is the politically-correct phrase of the moment in New Zealand. It encompasses the more formal “knowledge society“ (with its connotations of a positive enthusiasm for learning) and “knowledge economy” (with its connotations of value-added products and services building national wealth). It also encompasses, in a general way, the rather more bureaucratic concepts of “national information strategy” and “national information policy”.

All these terms have a power of their own deriving from the words used, from the standing of those who assert them, and from the context in which they are used. Some reflection and analysis, however, exposes the unsettling reality that knowledge (and/or information and/or data) has always been inherent in human development. The whole structure of societies or of economies, whether at the global, national, regional or local level, is based on individuals communicating with each other, on recording ideas for later use, and on arriving at decisions or at new thinking by interpreting (poorly or well) the communicated ideas.

Hence the growth of language, of symbols and, later, of alphabets and grammar, hastened along by printing, and then by broadcasting, and now by digital networking. There is a knowledge wave (i.e. a clearly observable surge of activity, or increase in size) caused by the latter – but it is only the latest of a continuing series of waves which have occurred over the centuries.

As societies consolidated into units of sovereignty and, over the last two centuries, into nation states interconnected by regional or global alliances, information frameworks developed. In New Zealand these frameworks have followed the typical “western” pattern and are codified in expressions such as: laws for copyright and patents; privacy and official information statutes; rules of judicial evidence; national archives and libraries; treaties such as WIPO; and the commercial law enabling news media, publishers and investors to trade ideas and knowledge.

The purpose of this preamble is to emphasise that in New Zealand, as in most if not all other parts of the world, strong frameworks of law, convention, and policy exist and continue to develop, to enable the creation and use of information and knowledge. In New Zealand these can be considered holistically to constitute a “national information policy” except that it has been arrived at incrementally rather than as a single strategy. The absence of this single strategic intent does not reduce, or deny, the strength, vitality and effectiveness of this mosaic of information exchanges. Just because a bundle of community activities has not been formally cloaked in a “policy framework” of the type favoured by advocates of “National Information Policies” does not mean that an effective, continuously developing policy environment does not exist. Indeed, one of the real dangers of seeking a single “National Information Policy” is that, by necessity, this would prescribe parameters and boundaries: things which are utterly inconsistent with the historical development of human knowledge and of its all-persuasive communications. The reality is that the only real examples of “National Information Policies” - policies legitimised by the State as the authoritative framework for behaviours and sanctions - are those of dictatorships which sought to restrict what information their populace could safely access.

Knowledge is an all-persuasive, gloriously porous material and any policy seeking, as any robust policy must, to define and scope it will (on the evidence of history) be doomed to failure.

Evidence of the failure of attempts in New Zealand to develop viable “national information policies” can be found in the distinct lack of interest in the concept at either community or political levels. In short, “National Information Policy” has never become a “public issue” (other than in sporadic instances over censorship) in the way in which “Environmental Policy” or “Defence Policy” has. Beyond the buzz-phrase level of “knowledge society”, it has not become an item on the public agenda – partly because it is not seen to be “an issue”, and partly because the existing structures enabling education, communication, publishing, the understanding of heritage, the protection of personal privacy and all the other aspects of “information” are self-evidently in place, are working as well as could be reasonably expected in a modern nation of nearly four million people, and are capable of continuous incremental improvement.

Libraries exist as one element in this existing mosaic of “information policy” and of the “knowledge society”. In New Zealand, a small and geographically isolated nation, hundreds of libraries exist and have done so for decades. Millions of dollars of public and private funds are invested in them annually because they are perceived to be useful, effective, and worthwhile.

They all interconnect with each other in various ways, from structured management frameworks through to informal associations and co-operatives. All interconnect with other libraries internationally and with the huge global resource of knowledge enabled by the publishing industry. There is a valid case for increasing this investment in libraries, and for improving policies and systems. It is a case worth asserting, both at the institutional and at the national (network) level, because of the increased amount of knowledge content that can consequently be made accessible. Such increases and improvements will occur as part of the normal business and political process – a “National Information Policy” would not of itself lead to such improvements.

Since the 1980’s, the case for a “National Information Policy” (and its more recent alternatives “National Information Strategy”, “Knowledge Economy” etc) has been asserted by certain elements in the library sector, and has now been formally taken up by the professional association LIANZA¹. Also since the 1980’s, investment in libraries has continued to grow broadly in line with demographic and economic trends – but it has not required a “National Information Policy” to achieve this – the “Policy” already exists as a mosaic and as a dynamic enabling environment. The campaigns and policy development for a coherent National Information Policy have failed thus far to demonstrate what actual added-value it would add to this reality. What appears to have kept the policy campaign alive, in the face of such failure, is its adoption, and its adaptation, by the information technology (IT) industry.

Any discussion of “information policy” now quickly brings to the forefront terms such as “databases”, “networking”, “digitisation” and the prefix “e-“ in front of any other word for which emphasis is sought. Technology factors, from computers in schools through to national broadband networks, have succeeded in crowding out knowledge content in such debate as there has been.

It is content, however, which has historically been the resource which has made the real difference to understanding, to learning, and to the creation of new knowledge. “Knowledge is a collective accomplishment, where new knowledge is conditional on what has come before, is rarely if ever generated by an individual in isolation, and is inflected by the cultural, institutional and physical settings in which it is produced”². The history of libraries has been the history of valuing knowledge for its own sake, and of making it possible to compare, contrast and to challenge records to create new knowledge. In a “digital age”, the potential ways in which new knowledge is created out of exploring and challenging the “facts” of the present are, demonstrably, increased enormously. Decades after MacLuhan first coined the phrase; the “medium” of IT and of telecommunications has become the received “message” of national information policy thinking. The place of content is, by comparison, marginalized. In the New Zealand strategy paper¹, the critical role of publishers, retailers and editors is briefly dismissed in s. 2.4.1. (iii) as “who simply [sic] reproduce and package works for knowledge content distribution”. Freedom of the press, surely at the heart of any consideration of national information, gets no mention at all.

The library profession has been quick to question and to challenge the success of publishers such as Elsevier who have sought to bring value-added information to the marketplace. In contrast the profession has all too often been muted about the indifferent outcomes of the numerous IT-based projects which have failed to achieve their goals.

In embracing information management theory formed in either IT-based “information systems” work or in register-type applications, national information policy advocates in New Zealand have all too often

minimalised the value of the core asset – the accumulated resource of recorded knowledge. The recent history of government libraries over the last two decades, when public policy in New Zealand has been to “roll back the state” in favour of corporate structures and of competition theory to resolve most issues, has been typified by a widespread culling of collections, and of the organizational memory which understood them. This appears to have gone well beyond the pragmatic elimination of unnecessary duplication, and has even extended to the fragmentation of the previous inter-lending scheme which enabled, in an equitable way, the library resources of the country as a whole to be utilised to the fullest extent. In a curious way, resource-sharing has become more difficult organizationally at the very same time as the means to facilitate it have improved. The subsequent closure of some government libraries, and the subsuming of others within IT-driven Information Centres, provides evidence of the failure of this policy of reductionism to ensure their viability.

Yet it is in the latent value of the resource of collections (using the word in its fullest sense to encompass content in all formats), the outcome of investment in knowledge over decades, that the distinctive competitive advantage of government libraries lies. No other sector of the information industry has the professional skills or perception to recognise this value, or to leverage it. On the eve of his retirement this year, the Chief Executive of the National Library of New Zealand noted: “The more sources of information in the network then the richer the content. For a small country like New Zealand there are huge benefits from having the information resources of the country all within a network. The country then has the ability to know itself, capitalise on its unique character and identity and use this to enrich its population through increased knowledge of itself and the world. At one end of the scale national and international networks enable entrepreneurs to convert knowledge into commercial enterprise. At the other, artists, researchers and scholars create meaning through knowledge and New Zealanders have easy access to all types of information as a part of their everyday lives.

If these ideas are important to our necessary sense of place in the modern national and international environment it is essential that New Zealand’s library sector does all it can to increase and expand its resource sharing and networking. All parts of the library sector need to think through their contribution and open up their resources in ways that make the information fabric of the country an essential element in its future success”.³

The challenge now is for government libraries, and others, to identify and leverage their own rich content so that the networks referred to can deliver the fullest return on their investment.

The accumulated historical record is the overlooked dimension of national information policy thinking. Much of it exists only in print formats and so is all too often presented as lacking the appeal or ease of digitised content, and thus of being of lesser inherent value. The creation of new ideas, of new products and of new forms of community all depends on understanding the present - and the past - influences and beliefs which shape them. This is not an easy business, nor has it ever been, as the tradition of rigorous academic scholarship shows. An IT-based view of national information policy will inevitably be skewed towards the medium and not to the content. It is content whose accessibility and understanding is the essential underpinning of any viable “knowledge society”. Without a firm basis on, and primary commitment to, the value of content, national information policy and its associated rhetorical terms look set to be a formless chimera. If government libraries in New Zealand do not show leadership in leveraging this overlooked dimension, they are in danger of losing what strategic opportunity they have to influence policy development and investment towards a sustainable “knowledge society”. That strategic opportunity is to champion content, and to assert the value of the accumulated records of knowledge created over time.

Unless government libraries themselves model this principle in the ways they work and in the ways they allocate their resources, they will be unlikely to differentiate themselves from the many other policy advocates asserting that knowledge-based development will result from more databases, more bandwidth and more e-words.

To asset a “Knowledge Society” is not only to set a desirable social and economic goal. It acknowledges that the world has moved from an “industrial” to an “information” economy; and that this move is probably inexorable. What this conference paper argues is that this knowledge-based future:

- i) is not characterized only by massive investment in IT infrastructure.
- ii) is not in essence different from the past evolution of human society, which has always used and created knowledge to survive, to prosper and to grow.
- iii) is not dependant on a formal policy structure at the national level. The continued incremental development of educational, cultural and commercial principles will allow knowledge growth so long as policies which might impede the free flow of ideas are resisted.
- iv) is, above all, based on a respect for, and appreciation of, knowledge content as the key driver.

Libraries have for centuries been effective champions of content, and the collective resources of the libraries represented by IFLA are a critical component of any knowledge-based futures.

The tendency for these knowledge-based futures to be positioned as (a) a matter of information technology and (b) dependent on formal policy frameworks can result in actual content being the overlooked dimension.

CONCLUSION:

The theme of this conference session is the role of government libraries in influencing, developing and implementing national information policies. The key influence will be the observable behaviour and belief set of the individual library. Government libraries have a role to model the value of the information mosaic built up over time and across cultures. If they are seen to marginalize the value of pre-digital recorded knowledge, then that resource will become the overlooked dimension of the policy. Apart from libraries, there are very few if any agencies of government which understand the social significance of the accumulated resource of knowledge in the public domain.

A powerful contribution which government libraries can make to policy development for national information policy is to assert the enduring values of librarianship: drawing together different knowledge formats, covering all shades of opinion, in a structure which enables the end-user to challenge, and to be challenged by, a range of differing data. An apparently inevitable trend of IT-based systems is that they encourage a more homogenous view of knowledge; that all the units of information are somehow variants of the same thing and can be disaggregated into interchangeable components.

Left to itself, this could result in national information policy becoming little more than a formal framework for the interchange of statistical or personal data between citizens and the various agencies of the state. While this may result in some operational efficiencies, it is not of itself going to build at the national level an appreciation of knowledge as the source of creativity. It is entrepreneurial creativity which is seen as the necessary pre-condition by those advocating “the knowledge society” as the right strategic path for New Zealand.

Finally, government libraries need not subscribe to the view that national information policy requires formal expression. Viable national information policies, uncapitalized, can be formed from the continuous interaction of knowledge-based activities, risks and opportunities. These are the actual conditions under

which the creation of new knowledge in and for New Zealand will grow. The library role of gathering together knowledge, and then of enabling meaningful access to it, so that this climate of creativity can flourish, is a precious one and has been proven over decades to work. Creativity will be impeded if IT-skewed thinking marginalizes the knowledge itself to the point that it is allowed to become the overlooked dimension.

References

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- ³ Blake, Christopher (2002) 'A Farewell to Arms; some reflections on my time at the National Library of New Zealand' *Library Life* 268 p.12.