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Public Libraries in the Information Society: What do Information Policies say?

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Abstract

There is still lack of development of a body of theory or practice relating to the evaluation and delivery aspects of information policy. Mainly, no single all-encompassing policy exists. They rather tend to address specific issues and, at times, tend to be fragmented, overlapping, and contradictory. Despite the difficulties of conceiving a national policy towards public libraries, the overall approach that a government makes toward them is an important measure of its commitment to information policy as a whole. The place public libraries have in a government's priorities is a good measure of that government's commitment to an informed and educated citizenry. □ This paper attempts to examine the roles of public libraries in broader public policy, and addresses their social impact towards the "information society".

Introduction

***"Libraries serve the most fundamental ideals of our society
as uniquely democratic institutions."***

Information policy is a broad concept, covering any aspect of policy making at an organizational, local, national or international level that has impact on information flow,

whether in electronic or any other format, and that the potential benefits are not all economic. What has concentrated the resources of governments and others on the information policy area is the concept of the “information society” or “information age”. The information society is not just the Internet any more than a public library is just a place to borrow books.

Definitions of the scope of information policy and strategy vary. Some confusion is caused by failing to distinguish aspects which are relevant at the several national levels from those which are relevant only to local bodies, private sector institutions, or the professions. Thus, in some quarters, it seems that the field of information policy is deemed to cover only that which is within the field of information scientists and librarians. The definition in the Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science is capable of being taken in a broad sense. It states: “Information policy, a field encompassing both information science and public policy, treats information as both a commodity – adheres to the economic theory of property rights – and a resource to be collected, protected, shared, manipulated and managed.”

In general, national policy towards libraries seems to be to ensure that a public library service is available to everyone – and backed up by a national library, which provides not only a comprehensive reference collection of all types of publications but also a document supply service.

It is a truism that governments generally decide on national information policies (called the *dirigiste* approach). Even the lack of a policy is a policy. National information policies are subject to party politics, and usually a government cannot create or develop information policy in isolation but as part of a regional grouping like the European Union, the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), and the like. Furthermore, many organizations are involved in formulating and operating information policy at the national level. Policies emanate not only from the Legislature and the Executive branch of the government but also from the various Ministries and Departments and from official agencies and public authorities (For an example, see Figure 1).

While progress in the field of information policy is being made, it is widely agreed that the subject is still presently at early stages of intellectual maturity, with little consensus on what precisely the field comprises. This paper attempts to examine the role of public libraries in the context of broader public policy, and addresses their social impact. It focuses more on policies concerning public libraries and information services in general terms, and not so much with information infrastructure nor communications technologies and services.

The need to ensure that citizens are able to access the wealth of digital information resources is one of the key yet complex issues receiving attention by policy makers involved in the development of the Information Society. Coordinated action at the regional level (e.g. ASEAN) aimed at:

1. *Improving conditions for citizens’ access to information resources by addressing the legal, technical, economic, and policy issues which can enhance or inhibit access via libraries;*

2. *Assisting libraries in meeting the needs of citizens, by recommending suitable infrastructures, alliances, and training measures.*

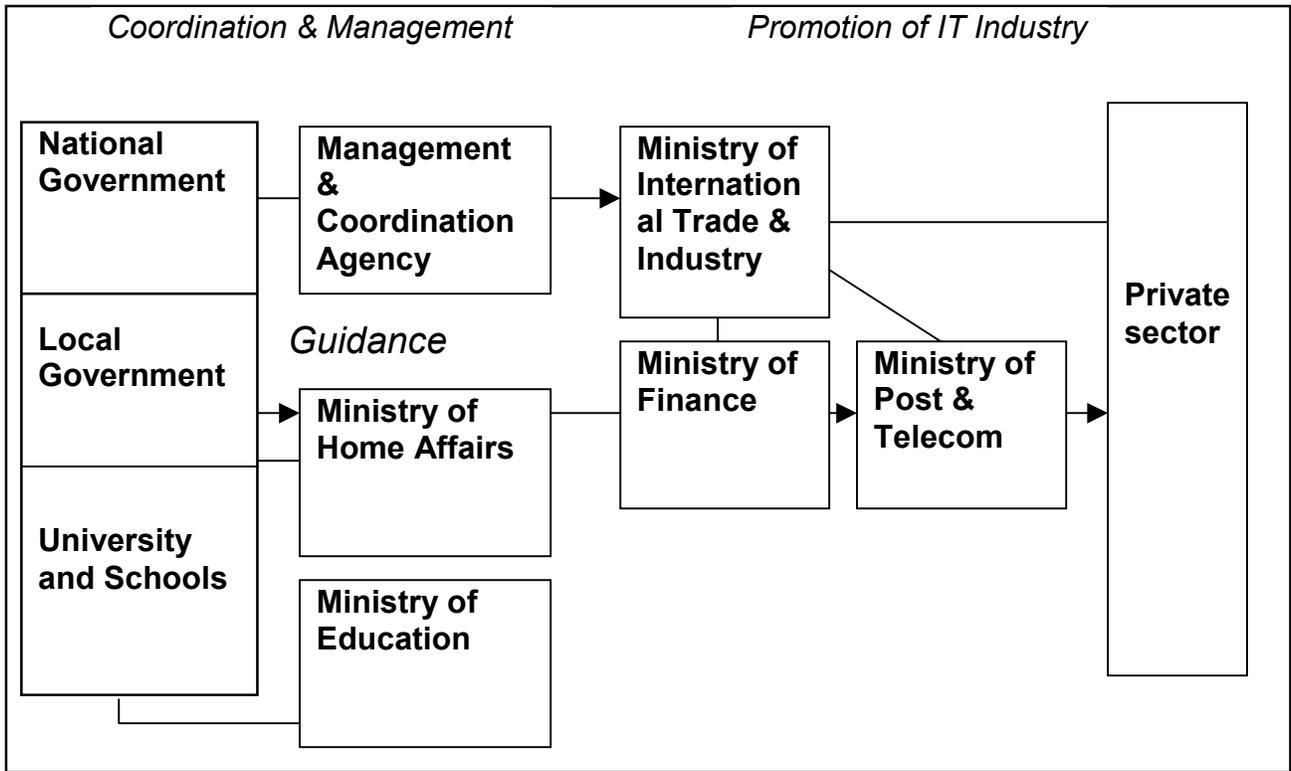


Figure 1: Model of a National IT Plan (Lau, 1997)

Another important issue is the contribution that libraries can make to the key societal challenges. There is a need to identify the barriers in the transition to the information society, as in the following areas:

- The need to help citizens benefit from the information society, including the provision of access points and services for those without their own means;
- The need to ensure freedom of access to information and knowledge while maintaining a fair balance between the interests of producers and users regarding copyright and other rights;
- The relative difficulty for users in certain regions to access networked information resources owing to disparities in the technical infrastructure;
- The danger that access to certain information resources could be curtailed by commercial interests leading to a widening gap between the information rich and the information poor;
- The cost of extending library services to the information society while maintaining long-term access to traditional and digital resources.

National Information Policies

There are many ways that information policies can be classified (Hill, 1994). One can

distinguish the policies by the audience they are meant to affect – central government, local government, the health service, manufacturing industry, citizens, etc. Moore (1998) has developed a matrix for classifying and identifying national information policies which he has applied to a number of countries, and in doing so, had pointed out inconsistencies between stated policies and reality. Alternatively, one can divide policies according to the type of instrument used to make them happen. Using this approach, six policy approaches can be identified: legislation, regulation, infrastructure development, service provision, education policies, and cultural information policies (Horton, 1998). However it is classified or characterized, the development of a national information policy cannot take place except in coordination with similar developments in other countries. Electronic information traveling along telecommunications networks does not respect international boundaries, and is rarely affected by differences in local regulations or laws. Each country should therefore resist the temptation to develop national policies that are incompatible with policy consensus developing around the world. The major problem, however, between the first and the third world is the time it takes to transfer something from the realm of possibility to reality. Without doubt, there is no single correct information policy that applies to every country. Each country has to play to its strengths and address its weaknesses. It is therefore impossible to draw conclusions regarding what the “right” set of policies is, although Moore (1997) argues persuasively that interventionist policies are the most successful. Nonetheless, it cannot be stated too strongly: we are now living in an information society, and government’s attitude towards information policies will have a profound effect on everyone’s lives in the future.

The goals of information policy are remarkably similar. They are a set of aims that are shared by the G7 nations, by developing nations like Thailand, by newly industrialized countries like South Africa, and by small but mature economies like Belgium or Finland. Broadly, what all these states are trying to achieve is first, cheap and efficient telecommunications infrastructures that will enable individuals and organizations to communicate with one another. Increasingly, the pressure is on to expand the capacity to accommodate the larger flows of digital information. The second goal is to improve industrial and commercial competitiveness and productivity by making organizations use information as a resource. A prerequisite for this is a skilled and educated workforce. The third policy goal is, therefore, to improve education and training. An information society is also seen as a means of promoting social harmony and cohesion. In less developed countries, the same goal of social cohesion is identifiable but here the motivation comes not from rising levels of fragmentation, but from a concern to ensure that everyone benefits from economic growth. Thus the intention is to reduce the disparity between rural and urban areas, to narrow the gap between the poor and the rich, and in countries like Malaysia, to ensure that there is racial and religious harmony. This is closely related to a set of political goals wherein the information superhighway is seen as a means of promoting more informed democracy and a higher level of participation. Throughout, there is concern about culture. There is a common desire to ensure that the development of an information society enhances and strengthens the home culture and, whenever possible, promulgates it elsewhere.

The wide variations in motivation contribute to the diversity of approaches in the mechanisms that are chosen to achieve policy goals. There are two distinct models that

could be identified: the *neo-liberal* and the *dirigiste*. Many of the countries following the latter approach are developing or newly industrialized countries. Policy implementation is driven by the state acting in accordance with a predetermined set of objectives. The state is seen as the leader, setting the goals and writing the policy agenda, as the model in Figure 1 shows.

Although the concept of a national information policy has been discussed in the literature and funded by some donor agencies since the mid -70s, it is only in the late 80s that the rationale for formulating national information policies was the imperative to ensure better coordination and cooperation between information systems and services. The focus was on the library, information and documentation centers, and they could be more responsive to a clearly defined target group. Although this rationale is still valid and the concept of cooperation is extremely important, there has been a very interesting shift due to the universal concern with National and Global Information Infrastructure. As a result, the purpose, structure, and emphasis of National Information Policies have changed significantly.

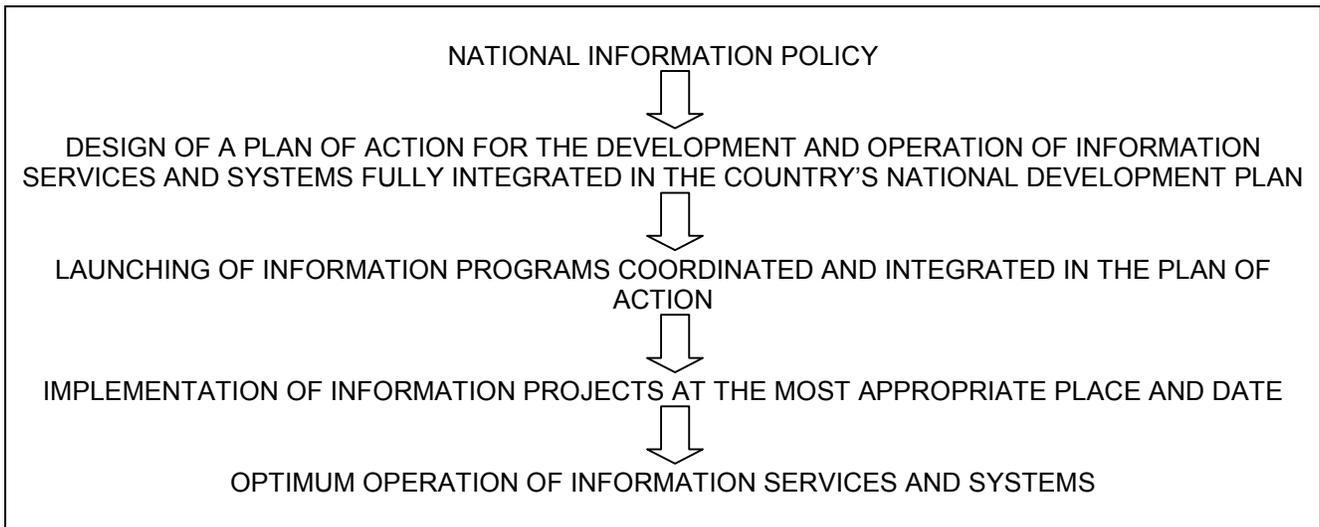


Figure 2: The Policy Processes

The processes in Figure 2 begin with the articulation of a national information policy. After that, there must be a plan of action devised, the launching of a multitude of information programs, a configuration of information projects, and then the operation of a wide variety of information services and systems. It is an overall schema of the processes that are set into motion once the national information policy is implemented. Although the policy-making process would vary according to the needs and conditions of different countries, there is sufficient common ground in the matter of overall objectives to permit a certain amount of generalization (Figure 3). Apart from the elements of the process itself, the main points for consideration concern the structures for information policy making and the major participants involved in the process.

Identification	Identification of the information requirements of society.
Implementation	Selection of specific strategy options and of particular policies to support these options.
Promotion	Promotion of the effective use of information resources.

Figure 3: Key Elements in the Information Policy-making Process

The Role of Public Libraries

Though information is widely recognized as a catalyst for both national and personal development, many people, especially in the developing countries, are still unaware of the need for information and fail to exploit it even when information materials are available for free as in libraries and information centers. Aguolu (1997) explains that this is because the availability of information does not necessarily mean its accessibility. Other obstacles to information accessibility in developing countries include illiteracy and lack of awareness of the need for information, geographical distance between nations, poverty and underdevelopment (Doob,1961; Schramm,1964). These constraints hardly exist in developed and industrialized countries where basic infrastructures and facilities exist and the majority of the populace, about 96% are literate and educated, and are able to exploit information resources systematically. However, the developed countries constitute only about 20% of the estimated six billion people who populate the world today. The rest live in developing countries, 70% of these people are illiterate and cannot exploit the information stored in print and other media. In many developing countries, libraries and resource centers are the basic channels of availability of publications. Unesco and IFLA support the establishment of National Information Systems (NATIS) usually under the aegis of national libraries in developing countries in their efforts to spread the availability and use of information resources.

Public libraries are a key resource for the general public, allowing access to the information people need to fulfill their professional and personal ambitions and priorities. A particular issue is that of free Internet access in public libraries. Access to the information superhighway through public libraries would provide citizens with equitable, affordable, and ubiquitous access to worldwide information, combined with local training and assistance. Will public libraries then play more important roles in the information society? Most libraries simply do not keep adequate management information or data to help make operational decisions or to make a persuasive case to funders. Many service managers are unclear about the importance of their services within the emerging information society, and the creation of a clear vision of their worth that is both powerful and can be readily understood by the decision makers will be vital to the success of public libraries.

Libraries exist to facilitate access and traditionally have not distinguished between users of different social or economic status within their legitimate clientele. Materials acquired by libraries are for everyone and could be used by everyone. The threat posed by the electronic environment is that access will be granted only on economic terms which

preclude many from using sources of information at all. Where rights owners impose strict limitations, by means of economic demands or contractual limitations, then libraries may find it impossible to gain access to such material at all, thus depriving all of their clientele of such access, whether they can afford it individually or not.

The best case that libraries can make is that they are sometimes the most efficient way of organizing and providing information and that they can aid growth indirectly by supporting literacy and education, among others, by making information more easily accessible. Line (1977) thinks that libraries are making the wrong case. According to him, libraries do not contribute much to economic growth; any contribution they make is marginal and indirect. What they do is to contribute largely to a civilized society. They aid the free flow of information by acquiring it and making it accessible; they help to counter ignorance and prejudice; support democracy by equalizing access to information; aid education and foster literacy. They help to fill people's lives by making accessible a wide range of recreational material, and to enrich them by opening up a world of knowledge in all fields. By doing so, they contribute to personal happiness and social well-being, and probably indirectly to social stability. The tiger economies of Asia have gone hell-bent for economic growth, and have raised personal standards of living but again, Line thinks that they have some way to go before they are either fully democratic or highly civilized, at least by western standards.

Libraries are both an expression of a country's level of civilization and a contributor to it. So far from libraries contributing to the growth of countries, they have in the past been one of the things that countries devote money to when they have reached a certain level of growth and economic confidence. Britain started to pay serious attention to libraries long after the Industrial Revolution had taken place. Has a similar process taken place in Asia? The fact that Singapore is investing a lot in libraries might suggest so, but it is doing so in the belief that the future of the country rests on IT and that libraries are a part of the information economy.

Lim (1998) claims that highly developed information societies have several recognizable elements, and one of these is a highly developed library system. The other elements would include:

- A literate population;
- A high level of computer penetration;
- The existence of sophisticated telecommunications systems;
- A well developed publishing industry;
- A high level of newspaper readership;
- A developed television and radio broadcasting industry.

By most of the above indicators, Southeast Asian countries, with perhaps the exception of Singapore, do not yet have highly developed information societies. This situation applies equally to the other developing countries in the Asia Pacific. At best, some of the countries in the region may be said to be emerging information societies. However, the information environment is changing very rapidly in the Asia Pacific region, caused largely by the explosive growth in computer and communications technology and the changing economic conditions.

The Economic Environment

Many researchers have pointed out the close correlation between economic development and the development of information societies. During the period from 1975 to 1993, many Southeast Asian countries grew at a blistering pace. Figure 4 illustrates the average growth rate of three Southeast Asian countries between 1975 and 1993, as an example.

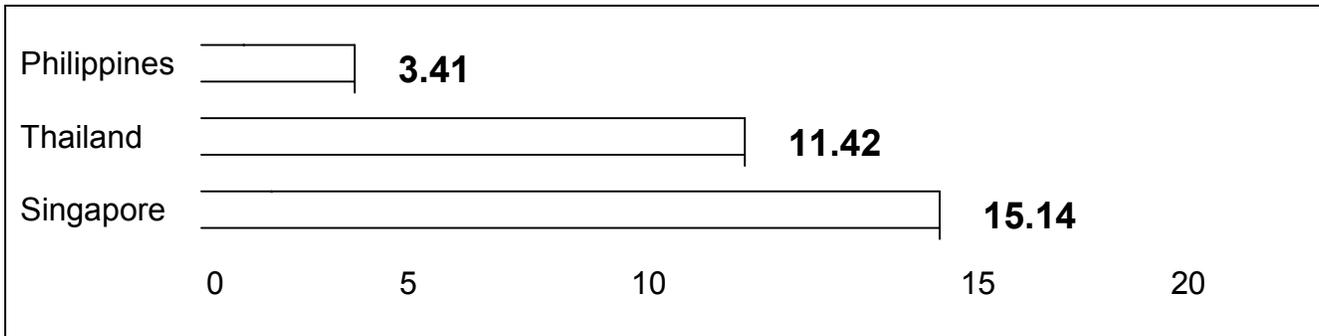


Figure 4: Average GDP Growth Rate 1975-1993
Source: Far Eastern Economic Review. November 24, 1994, p.43.

However, the “economic miracle” that has been so admired for more than two decades by economists came to a screeching halt towards the end of 1997, and the financial crisis that engulfed many Southeast and East Asian countries caught everyone by surprise. Several countries actually experience negative growth.

From the perspective of library development, this has serious implications. As Khoo (1990) has pointed out, countries facing economic problems “will stock up their larders first before they fill up their libraries”. At the time of independence, most Southeast Asian countries have suffered from the trauma of World War II, and had inherited poorly developed economies, political instability, civil strife, ethnic conflicts, and with few exceptions, weak civil administrations. It is therefore all the more amazing that in spite of the hostile environment, the seeds of modern library systems have managed to be planted, and even to grow. Most Southeast Asian countries saw a decline in their library expenditure in the past years. There is some hope that with renewed economic growth and an expanding educated and literate population, libraries will begin to flourish again. The irony is that when this occurs, there is the very real question of whether libraries will continue to exist in the form that we are familiar with.

Also due to heavy financial pressures, libraries are forced to shift from the acquisitions of local materials to providing access to those at remote libraries. Nowadays, technological capabilities and their costs to libraries are increasing while libraries’ purchasing power for maintaining the breadth and depth of their collections is decreasing. This was largely due to reduced support for libraries and library programs at the national and state levels, reduction of the value of the dollar against foreign currencies, and increases in the amount of foreign material being published as well as the prices for such materials. Debates on “access vs. ownership” are discussed a lot in the literature.

Just a few years ago, for example, Singapore was alone in having a clearly formulated set of national policies that was concerned with information and its use in society. Today, just about every country of significance has produced some form of information policy or is making an attempt to position itself as an information society. Singapore has developed advanced information policies to aid its economic progress and the public library system is expected to play a key role. At a time when other countries are cutting back their expenditure on libraries, Singapore has embarked upon an expansion program of dramatic proportions, the stated outcome being to produce a learning society, able to take full advantage of the electronic medium (Butterworth, 1995).

In Europe, the British Library Research and Development Department, now the British Library Research and Innovation Centre, had always had a keen interest in information policy at the local, national and international level with the aim of influencing policy makers in both national and local government and in the information industry, and encouraging the development of a more coherent attitude to information policy matters. Their work involves reviewing existing work on information policy and other work which may have information policy implications, developing a program of research and dissemination on information policy, and providing a forum for the presentation of issues relevant to the information sector, along with discussion on the contribution of research to these issues. In light of the growing interest in and importance of the information society, a series of Information Policy Briefings with the theme "Information Policy Issues Arising from IT" were started in 1995. Although these documents were developed in the UK, their relevance is international. Many have been using the term "information society", but it is difficult to find an agreed definition of this term. There is, however, a recognition that society is undergoing a "revolution where there is an explosion in the amount and exchange of information, and that this revolution is taking place due to the development of information and communication technologies (Information Society Forum, 1996), and that these technologies are therefore "generating a new industrial revolution as significant and far-reaching as those of the past".

In the UK, it is significant to mention that the government is committed to the principle of public libraries providing free access to core services such as book lending and book reference. But they want to go beyond simply maintaining the status quo. They want to ensure that libraries receive their due recognition and play a full part in shaping the country's future. They want public libraries to develop into an outward looking and proactive resource that both underpins the knowledge and information base, and plays an active part in delivering wider social and economic benefits.

In "New Library: The People's Network" (1997), the UK's Library and Information Commission calls for radical rejuvenation of the public library system in the UK and argues that libraries, long seen as centers of knowledge and learning, must be repositioned as the communications backbone of the information society if the UK is to be a dynamic and competitive force into the next millennium. The report emphasizes that unless libraries evolve and become the hubs of the information community, connecting everyone to the Internet, British society risks becoming a divided nation of information "haves" and "have-nots".

Indeed, the emergence of the “information society” appears to present a unique opportunity for libraries and information services to assert a new and more significant position for themselves in society. However, to be well equipped to seize these opportunities, the information profession needs to re-examine the range of its knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The IFLA Section of Public Libraries aims to promote equal access for all to information at a local level and ensure that public libraries are part of the national library network. It continues to evaluate and disseminate current research into implementing the Unesco Public Library Manifesto. It had also conducted worldwide surveys into national information policies, and had given reports during the IFLA Annual Conferences. IFLA regional conferences on public libraries strongly recommended the adoption of the Unesco Public Library Manifesto for public library development. The manifesto has been translated into several languages, widely distributed to relevant parties and addressed directly to decision-makers and political authorities at the local and national levels. With the adoption, the following actions have been undertaken:

- Re-defining the objectives and roles of public libraries.
- Setting standards and guidelines for public libraries.
- Cooperation and networking among public libraries: each library must take steps to affiliate itself with existing public library groups at national, regional, as well as the international level.

Of all the issues between the developed and the developing nations, few are more comprehensive and, seemingly, intractable than those arising from different attitudes to the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). The developing world’s perspective on the NWICO has been expressed by Hamelink as: *“The international exchange of information, in which nations develop their cultural system in an autonomous way, and with complete sovereign control of resources, fully and effectively participate as independent members of the international community.”*

Allowing for differences in terminology as well as in social and political systems, all governments today operate some form of national information policy. The two major stimuli to the development of these policies have been the need to respond to advances in the new technologies and to the accompanying political and economic changes. For developing countries, this has meant little more than an addition to, or a reformulation of, their existing problems of underdevelopment and dependency. For the more advanced nations, it has brought new urgency to the need for competitiveness in international markets and, paradoxically, a kind of vulnerability through strength.

Public Library Development in the Region

For a variety of historical, cultural and other reasons, there was no planned development of library services in the developing countries, since the concept of library planning and of coordinated national library services is one that has gained acceptance only within recent years. Thus, older libraries in developing countries, generally modeled on either the Anglo-American or the European (French-Spanish-Portuguese) model, display the same multiplicity of library authorities and overlapping and duplication of services, resulting

of waste of human and material resources. In some instances, however, the blurring of distinctions between the different types of libraries has been a positive benefit since it has liberalized access to limited resources.

Technological criteria	IT as the key enabling force. Widespread diffusion of IT in offices, factories, education, and the home.
Social criteria	Information as an enhancer of the quality of life. Widespread information consciousness and end-user access to high-quality information.
Economic criteria	Information as key economic factor: as resource, service, commodity, a source of added value and employment.
Political criteria	Freedom of information leading to a political process characterized by increased participation and consensus.
Cultural criteria	Recognition of the cultural value of information through the promotion of information values in the interests of national and individual development.

Figure 5: Criteria for the development of an information society

A reassessment of the role of the public library in the national information system should emphasize the promotion of literacy as a key concern. Kibirige (1983) has proposed six major aspects of library-literacy programs in developing countries four of which, that are listed below, need urgent attention:

- Librarians must ensure that they are adequately represented on national planning committees for literacy.
- Library planners must make a re-appraisal of national library systems to account for the latest trends in literacy programs.
- Libraries should collaborate with other experts to harness mass media to literacy programs.
- Librarians must use their expertise to establish comprehensive collections of relevant material on literacy programs.

Some national libraries have combined the functions of a national library and a public library. In some countries, the national library may be responsible for public libraries, or it provides advisory and financial assistance for public library development. A high-level national policy making agency on which all information supplying agencies are represented is a prerequisite to the drawing up of a national information policy from which would follow the detailed planning and negotiated agreement on the sharing of information resources, the organizational structures and the financial, manpower and technological bases needed for such sharing to be effective. Only then will it be possible to unite libraries and librarians

in working towards the goal of making the public library a vital component of the national information system (NATIS).

Berelson (1961) has pointed out that there is no general public served by the public library; instead, there are several publics. This is very much true of countries in Southeast Asia, regardless of whether the country is generally a homogeneous one such as Thailand or whether it is ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse, as the other ASEAN countries are.

While the literacy rate in the Asean region for persons aged 15 and above is much higher than that for the Asian region as a whole (estimated at 61.6%), this has not been matched by an equally high level of public library development compared with the development of academic and special libraries. Since literacy is usually considered a key factor in library development, it is necessary to examine it in greater detail. Literacy has been defined in several ways but the Unesco definition of a functionally illiterate person adopted at the Unesco General Conference in 1978 would appear to be appropriate: *“A person is functionally illiterate who cannot engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing, and calculation for his own and the community’s development.”*

Aguolu (1997) posits that the past colonial experiences of many developing countries and their general underdevelopment, directly contribute to a greater emphasis on the cultural and educational roles of libraries than their informational role, with which developed countries are usually preoccupied. He claims further that the more complex the society is in its bureaucratic and educational requirements, the greater its dependence upon library-based information services. The informational role is always evident in a society that puts premium upon self-improvement and a well-informed citizenry.

Tools for Information Policy Research

Methodological problems exist in all disciplines, but the area of information policy has more than its fair share. Despite all the difficulties and complexities surrounding information policy as an object of study, a considerable amount of material continues to be published on the subject. Whether this is an entirely healthy situation is open to question since, more often than not, its authors fail to make explicit either their methodology or their underlying assumptions. This is a particularly unfortunate state of affairs on those occasions when research is commissioned by the policy-making community as an input into decision-making.

Perhaps one key to unlocking that “complexity” is first to acknowledge the positions of policy analysts. No one involved in information policy can really believe themselves to be totally objective and free of assumptions and prejudices. Progress in information policy studies is critically dependent on finding ways to make those assumptions and prejudices more transparent and challenging.

On how information policy seeks to understand the contexts within which value is added to data and information, Figure 6 gives two important and problematic issues. Both have to do with powerful forces that shape the nature and extent of information flows: economic

considerations and power structures.

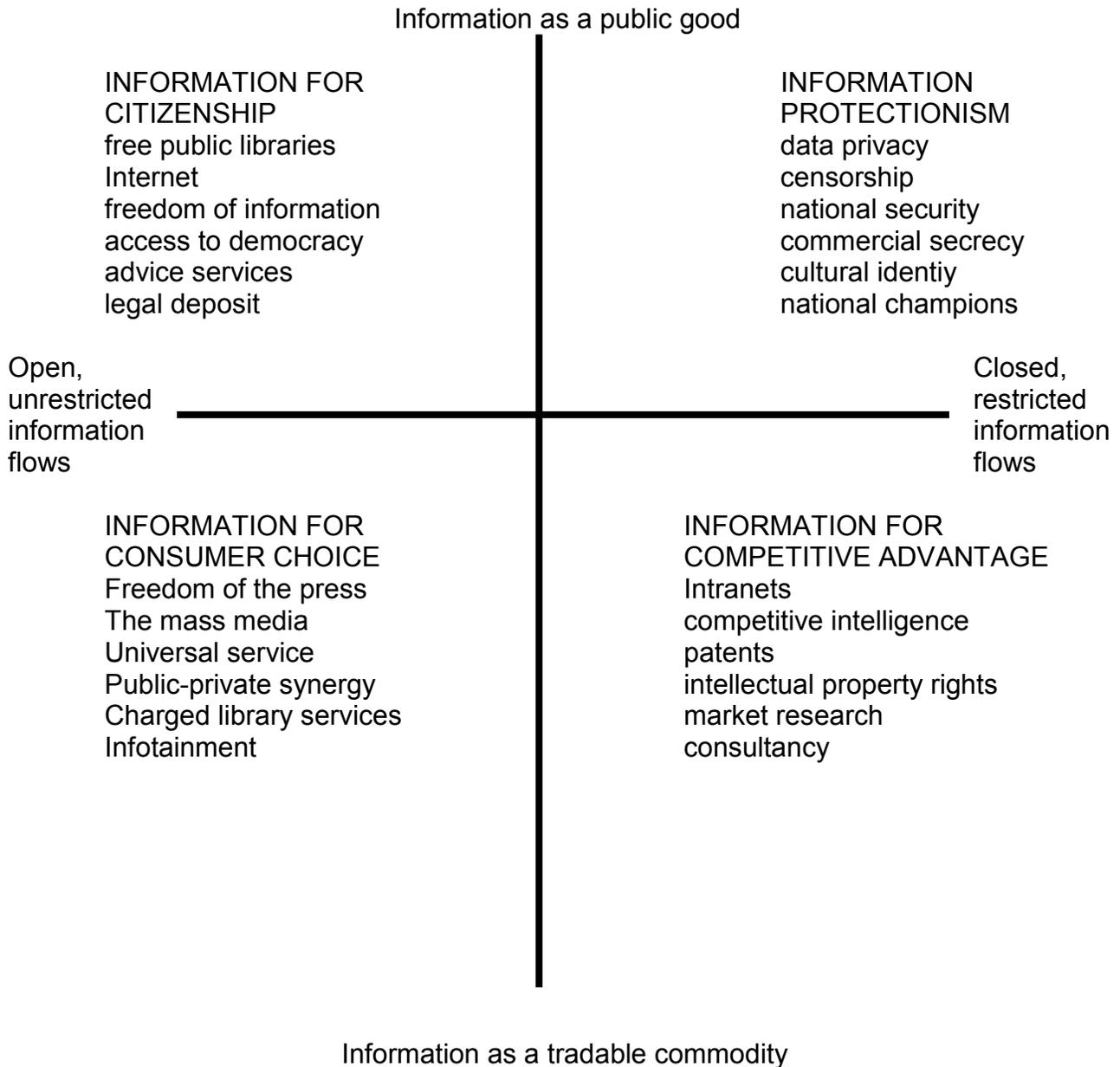


Figure 6: Mapping the Information Policy Construct

Economic arguments over whether information should be regarded as a tradable commodity or a public good abound in the library and information science literature. Sometimes, though rarely, both characteristics may be accommodated by means of differential pricing structures. The debate on this topic is extensive, but personal views tend to be fairly fixed and unmovable. The creation and development of information goods and services require that the investors be rewarded for their efforts. This means conferring property rights and enabling a marketplace to develop. The disadvantage is that these

rights may potentially erect a barrier to the world of ideals for those who are unable to pay. This, in turn, necessitates a further set of public policies, such as universal service, investment in libraries, research and development, and education, which deliberately distort the information marketplace in favor of the wider public interest.

Aside from monetary considerations, access to information and knowledge is also a function of power structures. In fact, there is an inherent tension in the notion of access quite distinct from the economic arguments just stated. In many situations, the widest possible access to information is seen as a “good thing”: health promotion, information about school performance, consumer information, access to local government records. In other circumstances, there are real problems in allowing unrestricted information access. Examples include policy advice to ministers, personal information, and information which might be prejudicial to national security or a firm’s commercial position. Restrictions on the free flow of information are sometimes essential, but there is always a danger that powerful forces in society will constrict these flows for their own advantage. Therefore, these two problematic dimensions of information – public good vs. tradable commodity, access vs. secrecy – provide a useful tool for mapping the normative structure of information policy debates.

ASEAN Initiatives

“The digital divide is here - between most of ASEAN and others in the Asia-Pacific, within ASEAN itself, and within most ASEAN countries.” Estimates indicate that in 1999, the combined individual Internet users in five ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) were only 3.74 million or 1 per cent of their population (ASEAN Secretariat). Figure 7 provides statistics for selected Asia-Pacific countries, including some Non-ASEAN countries.

In November 2000, ASEAN entered into the e-ASEAN Framework Agreement to facilitate the establishment of the ASEAN Information Infrastructure – the hardware and software systems needed to access, process, and share information – and to promote the growth of e-commerce in the region. As envisioned, it would link ASEAN with other major ICT (information and communications technologies) efforts in the region and in the world, such as the Asia-Pacific Information Infrastructure and the Global Information Infrastructure. It would build upon the ICT plans of individual ASEAN member countries, such as Brunei Darussalam’s RaGAM21, Indonesia’s Nusantara 21, Malaysia’s Multimedia Super Corridor, IT21 of the Philippines, and IT2000 of Singapore. More information on the pilot projects and other activities of the e-ASEAN Task Force can be found at <http://www.e-aseantf.org>.

Conclusions

Despite the difficulties of conceiving a single national policy towards public libraries, the overall approach that a government makes toward them is an important measure of its commitment to information policy as a whole. The place public libraries have in a government’s priorities is a good measure of that government’s commitment to an informed and educated citizenry.

The benefits of the information society for the ASEAN countries depend on the level of their communication and information infrastructure and the development capacity offered by

their economic and regulatory systems. There is great need for each country to develop the required national information infrastructure (NII) to support the kind of development that national leaders envision and chart for their respective countries. Experiences in countries like Singapore further underscored the importance of having the necessary information policies and strategies to guide such development of the NII.

Country	Internet hosts per 10,000 inhabitants	Internet users per 10,000 inhabitants	Estimated PCs per 100 inhabitants
ASEAN			
Brunei Darussalam	43.49	317.46	N.A.
Cambodia	0.14	0.67	0.09
Indonesia	1.01	14.54	0.82
Lao PDR	Negligible	Negligible	N.A.
Malaysia	27.03	367.82	5.98
Myanmar	Negligible	N.A.	N.A.
Philippines	1.66	20.56	1.51
Singapore	459.72	2,945.92	45.84
Thailand	6.60	33.17	2.16
Viet Nam	0.02	1.29	0.64
Non-ASEAN			
Australia	576.63	2,643.94	41.11
China*	0.57	70.25	0.89
Hong Kong	166.89	1,000 (1998)	25.42
India	0.23	5.09	0.27
Japan	208.41	1,323.42	23.72
RO Korea	60.99	668.32	15.68
New Zealand	707.86	1,575.42	28.88

Figure 7: Internet Data for Selected Asia-Pacific Countries, 1999.
Source: ITU Web Site (www.itu.int); *China, excluding Hong Kong.

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