

# PRINCIPLES AND ISSUES ON NATIONAL LIBRARY AND INFORMATION POLICY†

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## Abstract

The development of library and information services in support of a country's programs for rapid social, economic and cultural growth requires the establishment of a comprehensive, sound national library and information policy, which provides the direction and broad guidelines for the planned and coordinated development of a country's libraries, information centers, documentation services, and archives. This paper describes the UNISIST programs of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in promoting national information policy in every country. It also discusses the working definition, objectives, and the importance of such a policy. Detailed treatments are given to basic principles and major issues in formulating national library and information policy in the Republic of China.

## INTRODUCTION

The last quarter of century has been described as the "information age" and our society, as an "information society." More than ever before, our world is becoming information-

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dependent. The "information gap" between industrialized countries, whose information needs have been better served, and developing countries, whose information needs have been less well served, is becoming wider and more serious. There is also a growing concern for the disparity in communication and information capacities among different countries. To expedite the pace of social, economic, political, cultural, scientific and technological development, it is necessary to improve library and information services, to provide the information required for development. The effort to raise the level of library and information services in every country, including the Republic of China, which is among the more highly developed countries of Asia, should be carefully planned and centrally coordinated at the national level to achieve maximum results.

Japan, in recent years, offers a successful model. The comprehensive National Information System for Science and Technology (NIST) plans and coordinates the information service activities of all branches and disciplines, as well as the actual work done by the Japan Scientific and Technical Information Center (JICST): to collect, analyze, and disseminate useful information for national development. An official white paper by the Japanese government in 1981, on the development of science and technology, details the government's policies regarding scientific and technical information and compares these with other major industrialized countries. A Chinese translation is available.<sup>1</sup>

In planning and coordinating library and information services at the national level, every country needs to formulate a comprehensive national library and information policy targeted at supporting national development objectives. Intended as an aid to national planning for a sound library and information policy, this paper discusses the origin, definition, objectives, importance, principles and issues regarding a national library and information policy in the hope of generating further thought and discussion on this vitally important subject.

## ORIGIN

Discussion and formulation of national library and information policies, either in full or in part, have been underway in some countries since the 1950's, but treatment in library literature has been sporadic and incomplete. The systematic promotion of a comprehensive national library and information policy in every country was a major goal of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the 1970's, under its UNISIST program for a "world science information system." The emphasis is to provide effective coordination between the development of library and information services, especially scientific and technical information, and the information needs of national development.

A review of UNESCO's activities in the promotion of library, information, documentation, and archive services in every country provides interesting insights into several major developments under the UNESCO banner.<sup>2</sup> The UNISIST program was officially launched in 1971, after a four-year feasibility study undertaken in collaboration with the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU). The program, administered by the Division of Scientific Documentation and Information in the science sector of UNESCO, emphasized scientific and technical information. To carry out the program, each country was asked to establish a national UNISIST committee and to select a national focal point. In 1974, came the NATIS (National Information System) program administered by the Department of Documentation, Libraries and Archives in the culture sector of UNESCO. The emphasis of NATIS was somewhat broader in scope. It encompassed library, documentation and archive services and focused on national planning and development. Both UNISIST and NATIS promoted the idea of establishing a national information policy in each country in the service of national development.

To eliminate the duplication of the two overlapping programs within UNESCO, a decision was made, in 1977, to incorporate

NATIS into UNISIST and to place it under the administration of a new division called the General Information Programme, which reports directly to the Assistant Director-General for Studies and Programming in the UNESCO Secretariat.

The new division recognizes the interdependence of libraries, information centers, documentation services and archives that make up the back-bone of library and information services. It seeks to harmonize, on a national scale, the coordination, planning and functioning of infrastructures as an important concept in developing and implementing national information policies. Such policies are best placed within the overall context of national development policies in other fields and embodied in national development plans to ensure adequate attention, publicity and support. Of the five main themes of the General Information Programme of UNESCO below, the policy consideration tops all others:

1. Promotion of the formulation of information policies and plans at national, regional, and international levels;
2. Promotion and dissemination of methods, norms, and standards for information handling;
3. Contributions to the development of infrastructures;
4. Contributions to the development of specialized information systems in all disciplines; and
5. Promotion of the training and education of specialists in and users of information.

Listed in the reference section of this paper are several UNESCO publications on national information policies which can be consulted.<sup>3</sup>

## DEFINITION

Although the formulation of information policy and plans

at the national level has been strongly promoted by UNESCO under its UNISIST program, the definition of information policy is often unclear. The emphasis has been on scientific and technical information rather than on a wider context of information which includes libraries and information services covering all subjects as well as publishing and other scholarly communications and information dissemination.

A national library and information policy must be broad in scope and coverage. It can be considered as a conscious attempt to direct and improve, on a long-term basis, the structure, organization, programs, resources, and services of the nation's library and information systems, and networks comprised of libraries, information centers, documentation services, archives, and related activities. The inclusion of publishers and information industries, both in the public and private sectors, in policy considerations is highly desirable.

Put simply, national library and information policy can be defined as statements or general principles for planned and coordinated development of the nation's library and information services, including publishing and information industries, in accordance with the existing conditions in the country, and its information needs for national development. The policy should address the key issues in library and information services and provide administrative guidelines for long-range management planning, decision-making, and implementation.

## OBJECTIVES

In considering the formulation of a national library and information policy, several important policy objectives come to mind. These include:

1. The promotion of the free flow and use of human knowledge for the benefit of both individuals and society.

2. The requirement that information from all sources, especially from the public sector, unless classified or restricted, should be made available as a national resource.
3. The principle of free and unrestricted use of library and information services by the general public on a not-for-profit basis, and the charge of reasonable fees for specialized information services.
4. The provision of timely and relevant information for decision-making to decision-makers and researchers at all levels of government and in all sectors of the society.
5. The recognition of the important and mutually complementary roles played by libraries, information centers, documentation services, and archives in the selection, collection, storage, analysis, retrieval, and dissemination of information.
6. The design of appropriate administrative structures and mechanisms to effectively coordinate major programs and activities as well as to monitor and evaluate results.
7. The determination of source and level of funding to adequately support library and information services.

Besides the above policy objectives, the primary purpose of a national information policy, stated by Guinchat and Menou,<sup>4</sup> is to maximize the effectiveness of the national information system, and in particular:

1. To work out the information needs of different socio-professional groups;
2. to establish priorities in regard to these needs;
3. to decide how the national information systems should be organized, what services should be provided and how this is to be done;
4. to constantly monitor the capacity of the national information infrastructure (i.e., all the human, material and financial resources devoted to scientific and technical information); to

cover these needs;

5. to decide what measures are needed to enable the national information system to perform its role; and
6. to decide how the national information system should be further developed.

In addition to these main guidelines, Guinchat and Menou<sup>5</sup> also identified a number of specific policies dealing with many aspects of scientific and technical information:

1. Development and improvement of primary publications and, more generally, of the availability of information and data.
2. Expansion of document holdings and collections of data, and improved access to them.
3. Access to foreign collections of documents and databases.
4. Development of translation services.
5. Bibliographic control, indexing and analysis of documents produced in the country.
6. Development of documentation services (referral, retrospective searches, current awareness, SDI, etc.) and information services.
7. Coordination between the various information units and specialized subsystems.
8. Development and standardization of equipment for the processing and communication of information.
9. Standardization of information techniques and products.
10. Development of specialized manpower and training facilities.
11. Financing of units and the pricing of their services.
12. Preparation of appropriate legislation and regulations for information activities.
13. Promotion of services and user education.
14. Encouragement of research and development in information science.
15. Closer cooperation with other countries and participation in international networks.

Although this list of objectives, guidelines, and specific policies is by no means complete or inclusive, it provides some excellent examples of what a national library and information policy should aim to be.

### IMPORTANCE

The preceding portion of this paper documented the need for a national library and information policy. Such a policy is important for the following reasons:

1. It calls attention to the vital roles played by library and information services in national development.
2. It provides a general statement of direction for the development of library and information services.
3. It helps the coordination of planning and implementation of library and information services at the highest levels of the government.
4. It appeals to the government for adequate funding of library and information services.
5. It makes possible integrating the policy into the national development plans.
6. It invites participation and input in policy formulation by government leaders, planners, representative users of information, and library and information professionals.

The mere formulation of a library and information policy by a wide-range of interested and concerned constituencies helps to familiarize them with the work of the library and information professions and to rally their support. A national library and information policy is a way to make certain that the country's information needs, or at least its priority needs, are satisfied as far as possible, and that all available resources are utilized with maximum economy and effectiveness. This can only be done



through a collective effort in the preparation and implementation of policy decisions, joint actions, compromises, and the coordination of activities.

## PRINCIPLES

It has been said that national library and information policy should be formulated with the information needs and the specific information environment of the countries in mind. Beyond the policy objectives and guidelines already mentioned, which should be taken into consideration in policy formulation, a few additional general principles should be observed.

1. It should be based on actual situations and existing conditions of each country.

The information needs and the strategy for meeting them will differ in every country depending on the level of development and the infrastructure available. Often, this difference is dictated by the social, economic and political systems of the country. Allocation of priorities is necessary in countries having limited library and information resources and infrastructures.

2. It should support the information needs of national development.

As much as possible, a national library and information policy should be in concert with the development goals of the country. It should consider the established priorities in the national development plans and their information requirements. For maximum impact, national library and information policy should be incorporated into the national development plans with steps for implementation.

3. It should be formulated by a national commission at the highest government levels and be implemented by a national coordinating agency.

The importance of library and information services to national development should be a sufficient reason for the appointment of a national commission to formulate the national library and information policy. In the Republic of China's case, for example, the commission should have membership from the executive and legislative branches of the government, the Directors of the National Central Library and the Science and Technology Information Center of the National Science Council, representatives of the economic and cultural planning and development councils, the Library Association of China, the publishers association, and users. In addition to formulating policy, the commission may also be empowered to develop a comprehensive plan for the development of the nation's library and information services; that is, the means for implementing the policy. Such a plan may call for the establishment of a national coordinating agency to oversee and monitor the implementations of the plan.

The policy should result in a well developed program for the development of the nation's library and information services and the infrastructures necessary for their provision.

Because a national policy is considered as a statement or general principle for planned and coordinated development of the nation's library and information services, the design of a program and budget for the attainment of policy objectives should be the next step. The program may include both long and medium terms, and be implemented under the overview and coordination of the national coordinating agency. Again, in the case of the Republic of China, such a coordinating agency may best be placed within the National Central Library which has played a leading role in the overall library development of the country. Should this be considered, the status of the National Central Library should be raised accordingly. The placing of the National Central Library, as it is now, under the Department of Social Educa-

tion in the Ministry of Education is viewed by many as inappropriate and too low to fulfill its role as the national library. In policy considerations, the place of the National Central Library in the Government's hierarchy should be reviewed and, hopefully, adjusted upward.

5. It should emphasize the interdependence of all types of library and information services.

Although libraries, information centres, documentation services and archives have distinct purposes and functions, especially those with special missions, they also have many things in common and often cannot get along without the others. To enhance the overall library and information services in a country, the diversity of types should be respected and fostered while their common bonds are strengthened. Special encouragement should be given to cooperation and mutual support among libraries and information centers across the separate systems or subsystems at every level. In the development of information systems, not only scientific and technical information are important, other fields such as business, economics, industry, etc., should receive equal attention. A harmonized development of all information resources and services, not just scientific and technical information, is an important reason that the national library should be considered as the national coordinating agency.

6. It should ensure maximum availability and convenience of use for all information.

The policy should make certain that diversified library and information resources are available to every user regardless of their location, vocation, education or wealth. A comprehensive plan for the division of responsibility in acquisitions, cataloging, analysis, indexing, abstracting, storage, and dissemination of useful information should be centrally developed and coordinated. The methods of cooperative acquisitions, which have been successfully implemented in

many countries, should be employed at both local and national levels. In the use of information, all unnecessary restrictions and barriers should be removed to facilitate easy access to library and information services by all users.

7. It should consider the impact of new library and information technologies.

For effective and efficient handling of library and information resources, which are growing by leaps and bounds, and to better serve the information needs of users requires the application of appropriate library and information technologies which include computers, telecommunications, micrographics, videotex, and a score of other new developments. Recent breakthroughs in computers capable of processing Chinese characters are of great importance for library and information services in the Republic of China. In planning for library automation, the successful example of OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) in the U.S.A. in the area of online shared cataloging, union catalog, inter-library loan, etc., can serve as a model. The formulation and standardization of procedures, formats, rules, codes, systems, etc., should be established at the earliest possible stage to facilitate systems development and interconnection. In planning for library automation and networking, central coordination, beginning at the earliest stage, is highly desirable to maximize the cost-effectiveness of such undertakings.

8. It should encourage active participation in international cooperation and programs.

The recent developments in the international arena led by UNESCO and other international organizations such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the International Council of Archives (ICA), the International Federation of Documentation (FID), etc., have expedited the growth of international cooperation in library and information services. Participation in inter-

national programs and other cooperative activities through bilateral agreements or multi-lateral arrangements should be encouraged as long as these are judged as beneficial to all parties.

The availability of remote online access via satellite of large, computerized databases in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world has opened up new opportunities as well as problems. Searches of bibliographic databases often generate large numbers of citations for which the documents are not available locally, and the costs of searches are expensive. To save communication costs, certain heavily used foreign databases can be either purchased or leased to run in local computers at major libraries and information centers, which then make the databases available to local users. Creation of domestic databases, complementing but not duplicating those already available, should be initiated and the efforts coordinated.

9. It should plan for the manpower needs in library and information services.

Because the manpower needs are sufficiently diverse, both in terms of levels and specializations, a wide range of educational and training programs should be planned. These may include formal education at the undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as a variety of in-service training and/or continuing education programs. The policy should encourage the upgrading of library and information education at all levels and the provision of more opportunities for in-service training and continuing education. Position classifications and pay scales for library and information workers of all levels and specializations should be commensurate with the qualifications required for each level and be comparable with professions to attract and retain talented and dedicated staff.

10. It should promote the importance of library and information services and user education.

The promotion of library and information services and the education of library and information users should go hand-in-hand, as both will increase the rate and level of library and information use. It is generally recognized that unless the library and information resources and services are fully utilized, their true value will remain under appreciated.

11. It should provide the basis for appropriate legislative actions pertaining to library and information services and to publishing and related activities.

The policy should call for a review and update, if needed, of existing laws and regulations pertaining to library and information services, and to publishing and related information activities. New laws should be enacted and regulations promulgated to enforce the policy and to guarantee the free and unrestricted access to public information through library and information services.

## ISSUES

Beyond the major principles to be considered, some of the vital issues confronting policy makers in the Republic of China are:

- (1) What should be the proper governing structure for library and information services at the national level? Which is the most perferrable: centralization, decentralization or co-ordinated decentralization?
- (2) Should the National Central Library be the coordinating agency for the planning and development of the nation's library and information services?
- (3) Where should the National Central Library be in the administrative structure of the central Government?
- (9) Should scientific and technical information be the only concern of a national information policy or should such

policy cover the whole realm of library and information services?

- (5) Should library and information services be offered free or at a fee? This issue also touches upon the question of public sector versus private sector in information services, and the debate between the advocates of free enterprise and those of free access. Is it more important for the public to have access to the information than for a private organization to profit from it?

Because each of the above issues is sufficiently major, this paper can not adequately consider the ramifications of these issues from all points of view. They are raised here to stimulate further discussions by library and government leaders as well as others concerned in the Republic of China. It is hoped, that from a careful consideration of these issues, some consensus can be reached and compromises made. The end result will be a sound policy providing administrative guidelines for long-range management planning, decision-making, and implementation for the nation's libraries, information centers, documentation services, and archives.

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