BASIS FOR INFORMATION POLICY: VIEWS FROM EXPERTS

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Abstract

Information policy is an important aspect which determines the information and communication direction of a nation. But, information policy is a complex entity that embraces many complicated issues. Though various information policies models have been introduced,but each model seems to emphasises only on particular aspects varied in its range. Issues that become the core and basis to the development of information policy are also divergent in nature. This paper analyses the data collected from interviews involving 4 experts or prominent figures who have devoted much of their time to information affairs and information policy in Malaysia. Such a technique is adopted to supplement document content analysis technique which was carried out in a larger study. However, the results of the former technique is not reported in this paper. Interview technique is adopted as it is able to yield unexpected data which could not be obtained from the first technique.

Keywords: *Information policy, Information Access, Information society, Information and communication technology, Information professional*

1. INTRODUCTION

Information policy has great implication when it involves providing access to information that will increase socio-economic development in various sectors especially education, economy, science, technology and health sectors. The information provided is not limited to only scientific and technical information but also covers all types of information and knowledge circulated through the use of modern technology for transformation purpose and source-mastery that gives value to society (Soler, 2007).
Despite the importance of information policy, its definition was never agreed upon, especially by scholars in this area (Duff, 2004). Some terms are frequently misinterpreted as having the same meaning as information policy, namely information policy and communication, information society policy and information technology and communications policy (Beer, 2005). This problem motivated Braman (2006) to suggest an approach that involved listing important fields including aspects of the law, industry, information and the impact that information has on society. According to Burger (1993), information policy acts as an umbrella to a group of public policies which combine directly or indirectly with the information term. This is in contrast with suggestion contrasts with Trauth (1986) who asserts that information policy does not exist at all. He perceives information policy to be a set of activities with a specific objective related to information processing and communication. In a larger study, these authors researched common issues that formed the basis of information policy development by adopting document content analysis technique. An Interview technique was additionally used to achieve profound views from the experts or experienced public figures who were directly involved in the development of the nation's information policy. Results from the document content analysis technique are reported in a separate paper. This paper reports the analysis from interview technique with prominent figures in information policy of the nation.

2. METHOD

This study uses interview as technique to collect which cannot be obtained from any other information source. For this purpose, the selected individuals to be interviewed comprised of experts in the particular aspects studied. These are Tengku Mohd Azzman Sharifadeen, former secretary-general of the National IT Council (NITC) and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems (MIMOS); Abd. Halim Ali, Multimedia Development Corporation chairman (MDeC) who is also the former Chief Secretary to the Government, Halim Shafie, Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission chairman and Director of the National Library Board as well as Ooi Seong Ho, the Vice Secretary of Ministry of Technology and Innovation, specializing in the policy department. This interview with prominent figures approach is selected because according to Kulkarni (1999), interviews with principal figures could produce unique data that could never be gained from any other source.

Both unstructured and in depth interviews are used in the interview. In the structured interview technique, the individual interviewed could give flexible response whereas in the in depth interview, the respondent is free to talk about anything within the particular topic that is determined by minimum questions from the researcher (Robson, 2002). Apart from that, another technique known as the open interview technique, offers a few other advantages namely that it can produce answers that cannot be guessed beforehand.

The interview led to six related fields to information policy that aims to identify issues related to information policy in Malaysia. Although as many as 94 issues were identified as common issues that form the basis of information policy development (reported in another paper), only six of these issues are addressed in this paper.

These particular issues (i to v) underlie the Malaysian information policy based on views from previous researchers while issue no. vi (government information) is one of the five main objectives of the National IT Agenda (NITA). Besides, it has always been strongly linked to the information policy issues globaly since 1974 until 2007). These issues are listed as follows:

i. National IT Council (NITC) (Lallana, 2004; Xue, 2005; Ahmad Naqiyuddin, 2008; Tengku Mohd. Azzman, 2008).
ii. National IT Agenda (NITA) (Lallana, 2004; Xue, 2005; Ahmad Naqiyuddin, 2008; Tengku Mohd. Azzman, 2008).
iii. Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) & Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC) (Lallana, 2004; Xue, 2005; Tengku Mohd. Azzman, 2008).
iv. Multimedia and Community Commission (Lallana, 2004, Xue, 2005; Ahmad Naqiyuddin, 2008).
v. Library and information services (Wijasuriya, 1981; Oli Mohamed, 1991; Chaudhry, 1993).
vi. Government information (Lamberton, 1974; Bushkin & Yurow, 1979; Chartrand, 1989; Eisenbeis, 1989; Montviloff, 1990; Chartrand (dlm. Burger, 1993); Hill, 1994; Nilsen, 1997; Cornella, 1998; Rowlands, 1999; Smith, Fraser and McClure, 2000; Rowlands, Eisenschitz, 2002; Smith, 2004; Arnold, 2007).

The interviews are not reported in the literal sense (reporting each statement word for word) but instead based on the authors' interpretation as has been suggested by Samuel, Saratha and Marohaini (2001).

3. NATIONAL INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY COUNCIL (NITC)

NITC is the acronym for the National IT Council which is the highest co-coordinated body at the national level, chaired by the Prime Minister and members include a few ministers who represent the respective ministry as well as representatives from the private sector.

NITC is recognized as the central agency and forum responsible for co-coordinating the information policy in Malaysia because its membership includes all the agency leaders or ministries responsible for Information of Communication and Technology (ICT). This includes Ministry of Energy, Water and Communication (KTAK), Ministry of Science and Technology (MOSTI), The Modernization Unit of Administration and Planning of Malaysia (MAMPU) and agencies that are not based on ICT such as the Economics Planning Unit (EPU). Despite the existence of overlapping scope of work at the operation level, from the aspect of policy making at the highest level, NITC is a forum that covers all government agencies.

NITC is claimed to no longer play a major role as the coordination agency for information policy in Malaysia. NITC is getting marginalized because coordination is no longer practiced or given any priority. In the whole of 2008, only one NITC meeting was planned, which was later cancelled due to the time constraints of the chairman.

Other weakness is seen in the implementation of the National IT Agenda (NITA). The lack of good coordination has led to the separation of both the communication and IT component into two distinct ministries.

In 2004, NITA and MSC were both under the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOSTI) while the communication component namely Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (SKMM) was under The Ministry of Energy, Water and Communication (KTAK) This action is widely regarded as an undermining act that sets Malaysia back a few years from other developing countries whereas the opposite should happen since the integration of IT and communication in Malaysia started in 1998. For example, difficulty arises when the government intends to achieve a memorandum of understanding related to ICT with those countries who have merged their information and communications technology together.
In this matter, the government is forced to send both ministers from KTAK and MOSTI to sign this agreement. This situation is also replicated when the Malaysian government has to send representatives from both ministries to represent Malaysia to conferences or to The International Telecommunication Union meeting (ITU).

The scenarios mentioned above adversely affect Malaysia in terms of investment returns. It is also considered a waste of resource. Such a situation does not happen in other countries such as Korea and Finland; both of these countries enjoy good returns that reflect their good information coordination. Apart from that, several factors that impact this situation include demographic problems and disorganizations among political bodies as well as leadership and civil servants.

The separation between the communication and information technology sectors was to facilitate utility administration under a parallel ministry parallel with KTAK that is also responsible for the development of water and energy utility. On the other hand, MOSTI is liable for content development. As an example, the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC) answers to national digital content development related to ICT-R&D technical fields and Cyber-security for cyber security development. This separation of communications and technology sector enables KTAK to focus on infrastructure development, while SKMM will be the main authority for telecommunication networking.

KTAK was founded on the 27th of March, 2004, in line with Malaysian cabinet's new structure formation that replaces the Ministry of Energy, Communications and Multimedia. On the

4th of April 2009, the communication component became a part of the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture (KPKK)

Any disorders could be overcame if the present institution is reinstated and activated and is allowed to perform its functions as planned. Apart from that, the regulatory bodies in question must also be prepared for the ever changing state of the present world.

4. NATIONAL INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AGENDA (NITA)

Respondents claimed to not have any official document that may be referred to as the major information policy in Malaysia despite some having claimed that the National Information Technology Agenda (NITA) and Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) as being the main policies associated with the national information policy. Although this information policy document does not exist officially, its components and inter- agency integration has long existed albeit by ad hoc means.

The existing agencies and coordination bodies include MDeC, NITC, The MSC Commission, SKMM, and Cabinet Committee related to broadband. Hence, Malaysia should have a comprehensive framework that integrates agencies and information components. Respondents also felt that the Malaysian information policy was not comprehensive when viewed separately from an academic discipline and practical angle. From an academic discipline angle, comprehensive information policy should include matters such as disciplinary science information from libraries; computerization; telecommunication; and broadcasting i.e. multimedia.

A comprehensive information policy needs to be governed by one national parent body. Communication and information aspect needs to be placed under a single ministry such as the example set by Singapore in which all components related to information including the library are put under one ministry. This practice is in contrast to what is happening in Malaysia where the information sectors are put under different ministries with different responsibilities. For example, in 2004, communication component was a part of the Ministry of Energy, Water and Communications (KTAK) and the library was integrated with the Ministry of Culture and Heritage (KEKWA), but starting from the year 2010, the communication component and the library systems will be the responsibility of the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture (KPKK), whilst the information technology component will still be a part of Ministry of Science and Technology (MOSTI)

4.1 NITA Implementation

Despite not having an official document that describes its information policy, overall, Malaysia has a good, sound policy even though there are problems at the implementation stage. The National information technology agenda is implemented at the federal level through ministries and departments and highly depends on their leadership. Good execution of this policy would be evident if their leadership is dynamic in nature.

The fact remains that not all the ministers or the Secretary General who are in charge have in-depth knowledge of IT as most of them come from the old generation. Different skills and comprehension levels among ministers could cause NITA implementation to ultimately depend on the enthusiasm of these leaders. NITA may also face implementation problems due to the lack of understanding concerning NITA and MSC policies among government officials. The respondents also claimed that the implementation of NITA lacks of enthusiasm and determination. For example every department needs to appoint a Chief Information Officer (CIO) but this does not take place in most ministries.

5. MULTIMEDIA SUPER CORRIDOR (MSC) AND MULTIMEDIA DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (MDeC)

5.1 Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC)

Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) is the second information-related strategic programme in Malaysia after NITA. If NITA aims for social development, MSC on the other hand, is concerned with making ICT into one industrial sector to target economic development. In 1996, the 4th Malaysian Prime Minister launched MSC as the primary mechanism to accomplish Vision 2020. MSC aims to develop a world standard technological environment by attracting world standard companies to help Malaysia become an information based society.

5.2 Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC)

MDeC is the government agency that is responsible for the development of national digital content in Malaysia. However, the digital content development in Malaysia is far from being something to be proud of. Digital content developers are not interested to invest in Malaysia due to the shortage of graduates that have the required skills needed by companies.

The entire government body starting from policy makers to technicians should take this issue seriously. By right, the government should not only provide computers in every school, but it should also provide proper digital content that enable students to become more independent and creative. Apart from that, information sharing among teachers does not occurs as this culture is not profound in the society.

6. COMMUNICATION AND MULTIMEDIA COMMISSION (SKMM)

SKMM is the supervision agency and enforcer of the Communicant and Multimedia Act 1998 that is relevant to cyber law which monitors the communications and multimedia industry. Activity and service that are controlled by this Act include traditional broadcasting, telecommunication and on-line service, facilities and networks that are used to provide this service, as well as the digital content they provide.

Input from within Malaysia was not considered during the legislation of the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 because it is adapted from third parties namely resulting from the proposal of Dr. Terrence Austin Cutler, Principal Cutler & Co Australia. (Member, International Advisory Panel, Super Corridor Multimedia (Malaysia) since 1998). This act was previously suggested to be implemented in Australia but was rejected. This act is related to merger whereas at that time no merger was evident as the bandwidth could not support this. The Malaysian governments' adaptation of this act was to show that Malaysia has a Law pertaining to Cyber and Communication Act and Multimedia.

7. GOVERNMENT INFORMATION

There are several issues related to government information that were posed by the interviewed respondent. The said issues are as follows:

7.1 Government Information Access – The government issued document is accessible and can be downloaded by the public since it is a public right. However, the Malaysian government confine access to government information that is not only related to policy but is also related to operation and implementation.

7.2 Attitude of the government servants towards government information – Despite the fact that in terms of principle, the more information is disseminated to the public, the better, from an implementation angle, the government officials need to be careful because when a particular piece of information is issued they need to ensure no burdensome problems arise with it. There are some government officials who prefer to work in and environments where the public is not exposed to too much government information since they believe problems will arise if the opposite were to happen. Hence, they tend to expose as little government information as possible. This is in contrary to the slogan, "the right to know", that is evident in most developed nations. This calls for a review of the information delivery system in Malaysia.

Besides this, government agencies do not understand the concept of information life cycle. Even if this concept was understood, no efforts are in place for the implementation. This is one of the reasons why government agency websites are reluctant to provide information rich enough for the public. They prefer the website to reveal minimum information due to the reasons outlined below:

- Many ministries still do not appreciate information technology as a source to spread information.
- Government department's capacity to disseminate information as consistently and continuously as possible have not reached to a satisfactory level.
- Officers are over careful with information to be announced. Information needs to be expressed in such a way to avoid problem. It is the responsibility of the government official should there be any problem arise which relate to information.
- Skill is needed to process and prepare the information into an easy format.
- Government officials consider the dissemination of government information does not profit the individual or department as a whole.

Apart from that, government agencies seem to be less committed, unstructured, and without long-term strategies. They just implement whatever is classified as general operations.

The respondents also think that the computerization of government agencies is still low because there is not representative body that is in charge of it. MAMPU does not have the capacity to manage government computerization because it is not an agency with any national agenda. For example, MAMPU has no power on computerization at the state government level. Furthermore, computerization in government agencies is not the main responsibility that is carried out by this agency.

7.3 Electronic government

The implementation of an electronic government is affected as there are some civil servants who are still unskilled in the use of information technology especially senior officers. Apart from that, the government is also to be blamed for not enforcing compulsory use of information technology. Despite the growing use of ICT, the intensive use of an electronic government consumes time because it does not only involve electronic mail application but also downloading document.

7.4 Documentation Culture

The respondents also reported that Malaysia does not have a good documentation culture.

This negatively impacts national information policy development. In many developed countries, content development is far more advanced due to their good documentation culture. Malaysia, on the other hand, does not give serious attention to its library affairs and information service that has eventually affected its information policy.

This is not the case with government information in the developed countries should be by Malaysia. Any document that is issued by the government should be easily accessed by downloading them from the Internet (if it is not top secret). These days, any government document that could be downloaded over the Internet is minimal at best. This weakness not related to policy but is also a manifestation of problems occurring at the operational and implementation level.

7.5 Re-grading of Government Information

Though the fact remains that realizing the importance of re-classification process of government documentation is important to ensure a transparent government, it is not practiced. The procedures apparently need documentation to be reclassified after a certain period of time but this is not implemented. Such as situation only increases the difficulty in accessing the documents.

Information dissemination to people is important especially ones that involve government policy, policy implementation, information such as license fees and procedures to obtain licenses. Although general information such as procedural information, fee and on-line processing for scholarship application and etc. has begun to be circulated through information technology, relevant information regarding policy and development issues are still difficult to obtain. Steps must be taken to ensure that the public is aware of this information.

Respondents also claimed WWW does not involve common-interest parties and that there is very little dedication among policy executives that caused separation of policies such as the separation of the Communication Act in 2004.

8. LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES

The National library ought to play the role of central agency for information digitization. Since there is no documentation culture, the government has not paid enough attention to library related affairs. Among the problems that are associated with the library is the different jurisdiction and administration for each library. State libraries are under the administration of the state government while others are under The Local Council's authority.

Although the library needs information infrastructure such as the National Cataloguing System (the public could borrow material from a particular library and return them to any library in the country) this system does not exist. In fact the Ubiquitous Library concept (Resource centers that encompass borders and time) such as that previously proposed to the government but was rejected on the basis that the Finance Ministry was not keen on the idea.

No parties consider library science as a part of the information policy component. Furthermore, subjecting the library phenomenon to the authority of the Ministry of Culture and Heritage (KEKWA) invites unhealthy perceptions because this ministry is generally associated with the past whereas an information society is a futuristic, dynamic one. Libraries are not acknowledged as being important in Malaysia's national information policy which is proven by the funds allocated by the government to this sector. Additionally, no specific budget is allocated for libraries in this country.

Despite that the government is developing an initiative which is known as as mylib (pilot project to the National Digital Library Initiative which is one of MSC's initiative), the implementation is highly

debatable due to the lack of representatives from national library in NITC. Mylib aims to promote quick, easy and cheap information access to all levels of society in parallel with the objective of achieving the goal to become an information based society as well as to provide a wealth of local content through the Internet. Clearly this development does not align with international information policies that give priority to the roles of library and information services.

9. CONCLUSION

Analysis of the interview reveals that there is no comprehensive understanding on what forms the main policy related to information in Malaysia. This shows that the current information policy is incomplete in that it does not encompass all aspects, does not involve the truly important parties and is merely dependent on dominant or influential groups. In terms of implementation (year 1996-2002), it is heavily dependent on individual strengths namely the NITC secretary whereas, the important parties should involve not only agency and central government departments, but also the Parliamentary committee, library, consumers and the private sectors that realize the potential of government information as an important resource (Eisenbeis, 1989).

Information policy in Malaysia namely NITA and MSC is too general in framework. This form of policy is in contrary to Birkland's view (2005) asserts that "policy is a statement by government of what it intends to do or note to do, such as law, regulation, ruling, decision, or order, or combination of these."

The legislation of policy related to information in Malaysia does not involve comprehensive interested parties because it is not developed based on internal pressure, instead it is only based on external pressures especially the issue of national leadership. Although the public sector's role in the development of this policy is acknowledged, the public presence in policy making are minimal even though there are no obstacles hindering them from doing so. This is due to the perception of the civil servants who believe that intervention has increased the complexity of their work at hand.

In addition, legislation of this policy ignores the role of s information related professional. Input from this particular group has never been obtained. Again, this is in contrary to Eisenbeis' opinion (1989) who stresses that the development of legislation for information policy should involve several parties such as the stakeholders comprising of those engaged in information policy, including not only federal departments and agencies, congressional oversight committees, librarians, users but also private information companies that recognizes the potential value of government information as a resource."

Also, NITA is not effectively implemented due to the lack of understanding among government officials that involve MSC and NITA. The majority of civil servants are unprepared to handle both ideas. Hence, all institutions should functions as predetermined and take the up an integrated approach in both the development and implementation of policy information.

The tri-sectorial (government, private, public) development of this policy is known to be at a stop when NITC was put under MOSTI jurisdiction. However, the matter was reviewed particularly the NITC membership (consisting of permanent members, public sector / GLC, private sector and individual). Though there are overlapping and conflicts among separate policies, these matters are not serious and are becoming increasingly clear. The implementation of national information technology agenda on the other hand is a product of the economic motivation compared to moral values. The implementation of computerization in schools, for example, were driven by the chance to increase profits rather than providing quick and easy access to information to students such that they become more independent and knowledge-savvy through the various internet sources. This is in keeping with Arnold's discovery (2007) that claimed that "the value of information has changed from that of a public good to one that is technocratic and driven by capitalistic value".

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