

Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Access to Information in Egypt

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Abstract

This paper discusses the issues of intellectual freedom and the security of information and documents in Egypt. It establishes that there are no policies in the country about both keeping secrecy of the sensitive governmental data and providing access to information. The administrative fear of providing information, bureaucratic procedures, security levels on distribution and the human nature of hiding information lead to tight security of information and censorship. This situation raises many rational inquiries. Do we need "Internet Archives" for Egyptian websites? Who will do it? Do we need "Internet Archives" specifically for Arab world websites and who will do it? The paper attempts to make suggestions to improve the free access to information.

Keywords: Freedom of expression; Freedom of access to information; Censorship; Internet; Egypt; Bibliotheca Alexandria

A Brief Context

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were marked worldwide by the granting of substantial numbers of patents, copyrights and trademarks for modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) and products. The appearance of giant multi-national companies mass-producing information products and services, many of which incorporated

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sophisticated artificial intelligence components, and the proliferation of many small and medium-sized entrepreneurial organizations played a strategic role in evolving of the "information industry" during 1960s; however, the notion of the development of a distinct economic sub-sector called the "information industry" is still not universally accepted.

Nonetheless, the emerging sector comprised of the software sector and the communication industry is increasingly being regarded as a strategic sector in the economies of many developed and developing countries. The information technology, initially called 'IT' is increasingly emerging as 'ICT', wherein information and communications are being integrated into the various products and services such as telecommunications networks and sub-networks. The internet is prime example of this phenomenon.

Now, as we enter into the twenty-first century, we notice that computer and communication hardware and software products are being manufactured at a very swift pace and are widely available at economical rates. At the same time, after every few years there is a significant reduction in the hardware size, a substantial increase in capacity and speed, and significant improvements in software versatility. Furthermore, during the last few years especially, a dramatic development in mobility, interconnectivity and interoperability of the devices has occurred.

Librarians and other information professionals have contributed actively to the planning, designing, developing, manufacturing, testing, and evaluating of these modern information and communication products and services. It may be said that the traditional skills and expertise of this profession have added information literacy value to these products and services. To mention but a few areas where librarians and information professionals have been intimately involved are as follows: Distance Learning; Distance Education; Search Engines; Online Access Tools; Online Database Design and Development; Computer-assisted Indexing and Abstracting; Knowledge Management or Content Management.

In all these fields, librarians and related information professionals such as archivists, museum curators, records professionals and information scientists regularly work as instructors and practitioners. It can be fairly asserted that together with computer scientists and communication scientists, they represent all the core profession of the Internet Age. The Internet Age requires a very broad, multi-disciplinary mix of many kinds of professionals. Information professions, including librarianship, are the professions most often responsible for incorporating the information literacy component, the freedom of access to information and the freedom of expression in the evolving digital era.

What is needed is to formalize, systematize, and prioritize the free access to information in the Internet Age. The public policy strategies, programs, and projects in countries such as Egypt, should give attention to the importance of information industry, literacy and freedom of access to information at the very top levels of government. The responsibility and accountability for formulating these policies, strategies, programs and projects must be vested clearly in named ministries and named senior officials. Although Egyptian government is giving priority to ICTs but much more remains to be done.

Some Baseline Facts and Figures about Egypt

Since this is a case study on Egyptian situation, it is essential to provide readers with a profile of some key economic and social facts and figures in order to present the discussions and analyses in a meaningful and clear context:

Egypt population in 1993:	60.7 million
GNP/Per Capita Income:	US\$ 640
GNP Average growth rate:	1.80%
Unemployment rate:	15%

Internet access since 2001 is free for any person in the country. The National Library is reactivating its role in national

economic development. Special libraries have been increasing 4% yearly. New public libraries joined the cultural scenario and the inauguration of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina took place in 2003.

In 1980, The Egyptian Government adopted a policy aimed at condensing and concentrating the PC industry. In 1994, the invested capital in PCs alone reached USD\$61.8 million, and added 36,350 PC units to the installed base of 194,300 PCs (an increase estimated at 23%) (Ismail, 1995a). The total software market grew to USD\$33.5 million in revenues, 55% of which comes from reselling imported software. The local revenues derived from internally (within country) developed and in house software was US\$ 15 million (about 25% of which came from exports in 1995) (Ismail, 1995b)

Programs in support of the country's telecommunication infrastructure have been developed and implemented rapidly over the last 15 years, increasing the telephone line capacity from 510,000 to 3,121,500 units between 1981 and 1994. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) worked closely in this expansion with the Egyptian National Telephone Monopoly (ARENTO) to improve management and control of communication units and equipment. The breakdown of IT sales in Egypt is as follows:

IT services	24%
Software Packages	12%
Data Communication Equipment	5%
Single-User Systems	42%
Multi-User Systems	17%

By the year 2005, 'The Technological Valley', as it is sometimes called in Egypt, including 'Smart Villages', is expected to increase the national income by USD\$2.5 Billion annually, and create at the same time 250,000 new jobs in the manufacturing segment of the IT industries and 50,000 new jobs in the services sector of IT. It is expected that this project will acquire USD\$25 Billion in export revenues by the year 2017. The IT training programs in the country create, yearly, 5000 trained professionals

in different IT activities. Following figures demonstrate the growth rate of the IT market in Egypt in millions:

1996	US\$427.3
1997	US\$515.9
2001	US\$630.3
2003	US\$1495.3

Censorship and its Impact on the Cultural, Educational and Research Activities

The Justice of Information Human Rights addresses: The Right to Freedom of Expression, The Right to Freedom of Access to Information, The Right to Control and Own Intellectual Property, The Right to Freedom of Association, The Right to Freedom of Communication and The Priority Effectiveness to Access information legislation. Some milestones in the history of freedom of access to information were laid down by the United Nations article 19 which addresses "The Public's Right to Know" and considers it the core of Freedom of Access to Information. Other milestones were: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights; The Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, The Inter-American Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression; The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to Member States on Access to Official Documents; The recommendations of the UN Special Reporter on Freedom of Opinion and Expression; The freedom of information standards developed by the Commonwealth; and the Principles for an Informed Democracy drawn up by the CPA Study Group on Parliament and the Media in Perth-Africa.

Problems with censorship

We can look into the matter from several angles noticing the censorship situation and the royalties of intellectual properties in Egypt. The censorship still works as a strong governmental body in the cultural activities of the society. The government controls all forms of media coming through any mode of transportation such as air mail, service mail, courier, air and sea

freight, and ground transportation. At each point of physical transportation there is a censorship office to review all media forms: books, journals, magazines, videos, CDs, DVDs, microforms, etc. Fortunately these offices cannot control the internet otherwise it could block all information dissemination within the country.

Though these offices are needed to protect the Egyptian culture, tradition and religion from invaded products, but at the same time they create severe obstacles towards the access to educational materials and freedom of access to information. Many educational and cultural projects get postponed for uncertain period due to the bureaucratic and complicated procedures of these offices. They ask for many documents as proof of the sources of these cultural and information products. These offices interfere in the import of all kinds of materials such as: educational books, journals, CDs, videos, media products from any country including Arab States. They consider themselves the guards of the Egyptian society; there is no provision for procedures or rules to discuss the consequences of their decisions. These products are destroyed as soon as the decisions are made against their use in Egypt. Thus, the censorship officers need to be educated regarding the theory and practice of access to information and how to save society from the unwanted information; which is by knowing it and not by ignoring it, as unwanted information penetrates to any society through other means of communication i.e., internet or satellite sources and ICT communications.

Problems with data and intellectual property

There are several types of intellectual property or ownership of information including copyright, patents, trademarks, trade secrets, design rights and plant breeders' rights. The Egyptian government bodies generate large quantities of information. They produce statistics on population, economic production, health, laws and regulations and numbers of reports which should be available to any Egyptian citizen. But, citizens need permission to access the information from these

governmental bodies, and they bodies never allow for copying or obtaining information. The postgraduate research students in LIS departments get official letters from their faculties and institutes to visit government organizations for obtaining the real data and information relevant to their studies, but these organizations never give them the required data. This is one of the reasons that MA and PhD researches are weak in contents and analysis, because the minimum required information is not available due to the security policy of government information agencies.

On the contrary, intellectual workers fear of being plagiarized and theft of intellectual property. After all, without copyright, why wouldn't someone put one's name on others' writings and publishes it? Actually, copyright law provides very little protection against plagiarism (Stearns, 1992). Plagiarism means using the ideas of others without adequate acknowledgment. There are several types of plagiarism: someone takes your original idea and uses different expression and presents it as one's own work. Copyright provides no protection at all against this form of plagiarism. Another type of plagiarism is word-for-word plagiarism, where someone copies all words, a paragraph or even just a sentence without any modifications. In practice, copyright law is hardly ever used for protecting rights.

There is a fundamental reason why copyright provides no protection against plagiarism in Egypt, especially in the research and education activities as the most common sort of plagiarism is built into social hierarchies. Government and corporate reports are released under the names of top bureaucrats or politicians and corporate executives. These are examples of misrepresentation of authorship. These people get credit for the work of their employees. Copyright law is not effective for this sort of institutionalized plagiarism, especially in higher education community. It should be mentioned that only a very few individuals make enough money from royalties to live on. There should be freedom of access as well as an environment where people can meet their information needs but may not gain undue power or wealth by exploiting the work of others.

National Information and Research Infrastructure

The term "information infrastructure" denotes to the entire array of hardware, software, telecommunications, human, financial, material and other resources required to support the creation, storage, handling, dissemination, archiving of a country's data, document, and literature resources (or, more simply, "information resources"), and how these resources are organizationally, physically and systemically arranged to be interconnect. Over the last two decades, the utilization of ICT has observed the tremendous growth. Some of the prominently emerged organizations include:

1. ENSTINET: Egyptian National Scientific & Technical Information Network.
2. NIDOC: National Information & Documentation Center.
3. IDSC: Information and Decision Support Center (Cabinet).
4. RITSEC: Regional Information Technology & Software Engineering Centre.
5. NLE: National Library of Egypt.
6. EUN: Egyptian Universities Network.
7. Public Libraries: Greater Cairo Public Library, Mubarek Public Library, Heliopolis Public Library, etc.
8. University Libraries: About 18 university central libraries and branched college libraries.
9. The new Library of Alexandria (Bibliotheca Alexandrina or BA) with its unique worldwide role in information literacy and free access to information.

Many of these principal organizations belong to public sector. But it must be noted that private sector organizations have also begun to play an active role in the information sector, especially in the establishment of sophisticated information industry. And, in some cases we are seeing the emergence of the newer "civil society," a blend of hybrid public-private sector, which can be more effective than the traditional formats of simple partnerships. During 1990s, the real "revolution of information" began in Egypt, specifically after the Egyptian First Lady led an aggressive and strong campaign to stress the importance of the

new technologies to Egypt. The government has announced the start of highly visible national information services programs in such areas as an E-Commerce program, an integrated financial information system for the entire country, a medical information services program, an E-Government program, creating new culture & heritage databases, including:

1. The Archeological Map of Egypt.
2. Cairo Architectural Heritage.
3. The National Heritage Program.
4. The Musical Heritage Program.
5. The Egyptian Folklore.
6. The Photographic Heritage of Egypt.

The 'Smart Village' program has been established, wherein the government supplies the land and facilities equal to 20% in value for any given project and the balance is provided by the private sector. A union law for participating in information activities is being developed.

Impacts of the Internet Age on Egyptian Society

During 1990's Egypt achieved a significant level of information and information technology investment and application, primarily due to the strong support from government and university based networks. However, the pace of development has not been as fast as initially expected, especially in rural areas. Yet, the upgraded and modernized Egyptian information infrastructure is considered one of the strongest in the region. The impacts of this strengthened information infrastructure are extensive and we will examine some of the more noteworthy here. It should be noted that Egypt has the largest population in the Arab World, and also has the largest number of educated population (post secondary & university communities) and the highest teledensity (i.e. 5%) in North Africa.

The experience in implementing a data communication program demonstrated the reliability of skilled Egyptian manpower. These professionals are capable of establishing and

maintaining a trouble-shooting capability for rapidly solving problems encountered in the operation of telecommunications and electronic networks. The Egyptian National Network provides online services to 10 universities, dozens of institutions and official Public Authorities, plus 2400 schools (Dunford, 1987). The newest government information and information technology projects are as follows (Egypt, 1999):

1. The "Government Online" project which aims to enhance all ministry information infrastructures, and create an integrated national information network for the ministries, linked to the Cabinet Information Decision Support Center (IDSC).
2. The "Integrated Network" project aims to incorporate the information resources into various decision support centers.
3. The "National Database for Legislation" project aims to build an integrated database containing Egyptian codes and decrees with daily updates, including legislation enacted since 1828 until the present time.
4. The "National ID" project which intends to provide a national ID for all Egyptians, and involves building a database including birth, death, marriage, and divorce cases since 1900 to the present.
5. The "Human Resources Development" program, which aims to develop highly, qualified Egyptian human resources capable of producing Egyptian IT technologies.
6. The "Tourism National Network" program, which aims to increase tourism revenues, and market Egypt as a tourist region globally.
7. The "Health National Network" program, which aims to improve health services.
8. The "Banking Services Development" program, which aims to increase the level of automation in the banking sector.

Library and publishing industry

The following indications represent the current infrastructure of libraries in Egypt, and its rapid growth:

1. Development of the National Library.
2. Establishing of four new public libraries, some of them are very sophisticated and implementing IT infrastructure.
3. 18 central university libraries and about 320 college libraries.
4. About 3500 special libraries.
5. 22000 school libraries (Salem, 2000)

National Bibliography of Egypt (NBE)

The National Library of Egypt and ACML (Alexandria Centre for Multimedia & Libraries) cooperated to mount a very important project to develop a database for the "Legal Deposit" products and load it on CD-ROM (National Library of Egypt, 1995). The project is still in its planning stage and is expected to be launched very soon.

Revival of public libraries in Egypt

A new and well-organized public library was created under the name "Great Cairo Public Library" (GCPL). Its holdings are extensive and have grown significantly.

Revival of Alexandria Library

The Egyptian government, in cooperation with UNESCO, announced a plan in 1998 to "revive the ancient Bibliotheca Alexandrina by restating its universal legacy in modern terms." In the presence of heads of states at Aswan on the Nile, an international appeal for funds was launched to build a new library in Alexandria, on the site of the old one. The first objective was to maintain collections of works likely to have been contained in the Ptolemaic Library. But the purpose behind the objective was revival, not restoration, of the ancient institution as a "temple of learning." The revived institution will focus mainly on the history, geography and culture of the eastern Mediterranean world and the Near East. Special emphasis will be put on Greek and Egyptian civilizations, Coptic Christianity and the heritage of Islam. The

basic collections in the history of science and medicine in the present library of the University of Alexandria will be expanded and added to the new institution. Subsequently, each of the world's governments will be invited to donate a selection of books.

A new conceptual challenge for library and information services was posed by the revival of Alexandria. The experts prepared various studies on its roles and programs and presented a new defining role for Alexandria as a World Academic Public Library. Although both academic libraries and public libraries are well established types of libraries, but the idea of putting the two together in a new institutional role is novel at the world level. A number of countries are beginning to experiment with this idea where universities have important collections and services that could be utilized to support public, not just academic needs. The reason for this concept and term is closely related to the fact that Alexandria's expected primary user would be the Alexandria University with its 40,000 teaching staff and 150,000 students. In brief, Alexandria will serve the role of a public as well as academic library.

Since the primary role of all libraries is to disseminate information, Alexandria will have a modern printing facility with orthographies of Hieroglyphic, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Coptic, Arabic and other languages, as well as photographic services, and assembly rooms for major international congresses. It will also house a centre for the conservation of the thousands of manuscripts threatened with destruction held by Egyptian monasteries, mosques and museums.

With the heritage of the Ptolemy's as its inspiration, the new Alexandria will build a sum of knowledge embracing "the writings of all peoples." But unlike its ancient ancestor, the Library will join the international information networks accessible to researchers all over the world. Plans also call for the establishment of a school of information sciences. Ptolemy Soter's order at the end of the fourth century BC to "collect all books in the world" is now echoed at the end of the twentieth century A.D. by the call to collect "the writings of all peoples." To this end, the new

Library will continue the legacy of the old one: to collect and preserve the records of the totality of human achievement. The Library aims to provide information literacy and free access to information in the following respects:

1. By playing a key role as a center of excellence to assist in reforming the LIS curriculums worldwide by convening meetings of curriculum reform experts and educators.
2. By assisting information transfer between Egypt and the corresponding information resources outside Egypt.
3. By playing a leadership role for the whole community of Egyptian libraries in:
 - a. Professional activities.
 - b. Library services.
 - c. Library networking.
 - d. Document delivery and Inter library Loan (ILL).
4. Convening congresses, seminars, meetings and workshops on different scientific, technological, business, industry, socio-culture and other topics.
5. Serving as an open gateway for information in Egypt and a focal point for exchange of information, free access to information, free expression through its activities and meetings.

Conclusions

Egypt is rapidly introducing modern ICTs into all sectors of its economy and society. However, this pace is still not fast enough to fully exploit all of the technologies. Full exploitation of the state-of-the-art technologies depends largely on the information industry and literacy level of elite cadre of skilled information professionals. The need to train an elite cadre of information professionals is the foundation on which comprehensive Egyptian Internet Age plans, programs and policies should be based. The human resource remains the most challenging aspect of Egypt's development plans for the future.

We must acknowledge that the freedom of information have essential rules. It is a fundamental human right and

backbone of democracy and good governance. The recognition of this key right is essential to empower all members of society and to improve the relationship between government organizations and the media. The public bodies should be enforced by law to publish and disseminate a wide range of key information in a manner easily accessible to the public; urgent steps be taken to review the present legislation restricting access to information. The public should be made aware of their right of access to information and the civil society must not misuse and waste public funds. The freedom of information in Egypt needs appropriate legislation for playing a leading role in the region by promoting free access to information. Therefore, recommendations such as follows must be adopted.

Recommendations

1. Freedom of information is a fundamental human right; therefore citizens have the Right of Access (giving everyone a right to access information held by public authorities).
2. Promoting access to information should apply to all public bodies regardless of their form or designation.
3. Public bodies should be required by law to publish and disseminate widely a range of key information in a manner that is easily accessible to the public. The amount of information subject to such disclosure should be increased.
4. Processes to Facilitate Access should be simple. The users should not be compelled to state reasons for their request for information. Public bodies should respond to requests within set time periods. A failure to respond to a request within that time period should be considered as refusal. Any refusal to provide information should be accompanied by the justified reasons.
5. Requesters should have the right to appeal any refusal to provide information to an independent administrative body. A final appeal should also lie to the court. Willful obstruction of the right of access to information should be a criminal offence.

6. Costs for access to information should not be as high to deter requesters; costs be waived for requesters who are unable to pay.
7. Urgent steps should be taken to review, repeal or amend legislation restricting access to information.
8. Effective systems of record management are must for effective functioning and good governance in this regard.
9. New ICTs have the potential to make important contribution in the area of access to information and open governance. New technologies should be used to facilitate record management and maintenance.
10. There should be a concerted effort by government and public bodies to address the problem of the culture of secrecy. This should include comprehensive training programmes on implementation of the access to information as well as the importance of openness in society. Such training should focus to promote an understanding among civil servants about two-way flow of information.
11. Public education campaigns should be undertaken to ensure that the public is aware of their right to access to information. There should be an effective independent administrative body to ensure appropriate implementation of access to information legislation. This may be either an existing body or a body specifically created to serve that function.
12. The access to information legislation should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that it is effective in ensuring the public's right to know.
13. Promoting awareness of the right of access to information, developing public educational materials, training public officials, addressing the issue of laws that are inconsistent with the right to access to information and improving record maintenance.
14. Promoting awareness to develop principles of dealing with credit for intellectual rights and protect intellectual works from piracy.

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