

# **MEXICAN INFORMATION POLICY: A SCATTERED DECISION MODEL**

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by

**JESUS LAU, Ph.D.**

Senior Researcher  
Centro de Estudios Estratégicos.  
ITESM - Campus Toluca  
Apdo. 1101  
50000 Toluca, Edomex  
México

Tel. 52(72)74-09-99

Fax 52(72)74-11-78

Internet: JLAU@VMTECTOL.TOL.ITESM.MX

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## **ABSTRACT**

Mexico lacks a written national information policy. Nonetheless, information policy is set up by several government bodies. The decision model resembles a scattered decision model, where several agencies take action on whatever they consider to be the best for the public and the information-handling communities. A description of "de facto" policies set up by leading information agencies and legal framework is provided. The absence of an information blueprint is regarded as a lack of coordination between information institutions, and an absence of rational planning. If Mexico is to enter the so-called information age, it requires an appropriate policy framework that can effectively harness the information flow in Mexican society.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, national information policies are assumed to be a must for effective coordination of national library and information activities. It is also assumed that information activities can be carried out without information policies under the general direction of leading agencies either governmental or non-government organizations. However, this second option means less rational operation of information activities.

National policies are necessary for actions of national interest. If information is a major factor for the generation of wealth in the new economies of the information age, there should be a general goal which a country aims to achieve. However, who is responsible for creating such policies? Is it the federal government or the organizations involved in information handling and information users? It is assumed in this paper that it must be both parties [1,6].

Information, here, is described mainly as printed records and is focused basically in records storage and provision of information services. However, generation, distribution and use of information is also mentioned in this document, but space devoted to these parts of the information communication cycle is limited.

## 2. MEXICO'S INFORMATION POLICIES

Mexican politics, and, to some extent economic activity, is controlled from Mexico's capital. Information and library activities are no exception. Decisions and policies are usually made in Mexico City. The public library system is managed from the country's capital. Public university libraries and public polytechnic libraries are also administrated, especially the latter ones, from Mexico City. University libraries follow, to a great degree information policies from the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) funding body, FOMES (Promotion of Higher Education Fund) (See Table 5).

Despite the centralization of Mexico's information and library decision-making, it lacks a library coordinating body. It also lacks a general policy for library and information activities. Each information and library institution acts, in most cases, independently from the rest of the information organizations.

### 3. PRESERVATION OF INFO. RECORDS

Mexico does not have an information policy blueprint. There is, however, legislation which regulates several information activities, in addition to the work done by government organizations which set "de facto" policies in information activities. For instance there is a legal framework for the preservation of information records.

Preservation of information records is safe-guarded by traditional library organizations like the National Library, that was created by government decree in the last century, following the trend of the French law. Legal deposit and copyright of printed materials were also adopted by decree that dates to the 1800's (See Table 7).

Table 1

<b>LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR PRINTED INFORMATION [5]</b>
* 1846 - Copyright law is passed.
* 1867 - National Library.
* 1932 - National Serials Collection.
* 1965 - Legal deposit.
* 1970 - CONACYT is founded and given the responsibility of creating a National Information Service and Scientific Documentation (NISSD).
* 1976 - CONACYT published the document describing the scope of NISSD.
* 1979 - The Mexican Constitution is reformed to include the right of every citizen to have access to information.
* 1983 - National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics is founded.
* 1984 - Copyright of software law is passed.
* 1986 - Free Postal Service to post among libraries.
* 1987 - A presidential decree creates the National Network of Public Libraries.
* 1987 - Tax incentives for S&T databases.
* 1990 - Telecommunication law is modified to permit private sector to offer telecommunications services.

Recently, the law that created the national public library network was passed in 1987. This government law stated for the first time in Mexico's history, the right of citizens to have a library, funded by federal, state and municipal governments. Additional legislation was passed to provide free access to postal services among all type of libraries.

Mexico also has a National Serials Collection, and similar organizations to preserve movie reels, called "Filmoteca" (Film Library), and government official archives is the General Archives of the Nation. There are similar institutions in most of the Mexican states (See Table 2).

Information of different types, such as government statistics are, by law, collected and distributed by INEGI which was created in 1983. This agency is in charge of the national census, compilation of cartographic materials, software regulations, and geographic information, in general. This is the second most important information institution. It is responsible for official statistics. Some of these statistics are gathered directly by INEGI, and some are compiled from Ministries and government agencies. INEGI's information is available in more than 350 depository libraries.

A important ministry in data collection is SECOFI, which stands for Ministry of Trade and Promotion of Industry. SECOFI also grants patents and sets industrial standards. It is in charge of collecting and distributing this information to the country. The central bank, Banco de México, handles macro economic statistics. The Ministry of the Treasury control government finance and tax collection information. SEP is, aside from its library responsibilities, in charge of book censorship, copyright, ISSN and ISBN number assignation and granting licenses for publication of serials. Twelve additional Ministries are dedicated to collecting national statistics in their respective areas. However, most of them provide their data to INEGI, who is responsible for publishing and disseminating this information [8] (See Table 3)

Table 2

<b>PRESERVATION OF PRINTED INFORMATION</b>
<p>The National Library  National Serials Collection  General Archives of the Nation  Union Congress Library  Similar organizations are in most Mexican states</p>

#### **4. INFORMATION RECORDING**

Distribution of information, that is the packing of data or information, evolves freely in the Mexican market economy. Publishing, probably the most important recorder of printed information, is carried out by private companies. Mexico, despite its small publishing sector, ranks as the largest publisher in Latin America. It produces about 3,500 new titles per year. Literature or leisure reading materials are less important in terms of production, due to the limited purchasing power of the population.

The government is also a textbook publisher, producing all primary textbooks, which are free to every school children in the country. Public and private schools have to use these government textbooks by law, in addition to whatever books they may choose for their pupils.

Journal and other publishing is rather limited. Mexico has few journals. According to the statistics of the international ISSN agency there are only 1,805 titles registered. Even if this figure is doubled to include for non-registered titles, the number is a rather small for a nation which is the largest Spanish speaking country in the world (87 million inhabitants). The small number of titles is due to several reasons: research output is low, the best research papers are published in leading foreign journals, and the market of for journals is small, among other factors. Other periodicals, such as newspapers and comics, have a larger and well-established market. So, their numbers are regarded as satisfying the news market.

## 5. TRANSMISSION OF INFORMATION

The flow of data and information depends on regulations and policies dictated by the Ministry of Communications and Transport (SCT). SCT used to be in full charge of telecommunications services. The government deregulated the telecommunications monopoly in 1990, by licensing private companies to offer most communications services, such as courier services, cellular telephone and telecommunications networks, etc. However, SCT still dictates telecommunication policies.

TELEPAC is the sole public switching data network (TELEPAC). This is the only means of access to online databases if organizations do not have dedicated transmission lines. Costs are subsidized, a fact that may change soon with the privatization of telecommunication services.

Online services were originally contracted for the whole country by the national database bureau: Consulting Services of Bibliographic Information (SECOBI) which was created in 1976. This centralization of online services was justified due to legal telecommunication constraints. Recently, as telecommunication services were opened up to private carriers, SECOBI's importance was diminished to some degree, because libraries are now able to subscribe to database vendors on their own if they choose to. However, SECOBI is still the major database intermediary in the country, with nearly 300 online subscribers. It offers training courses and provides assistance to libraries in online information access.

Mexico was probably the first developing country to have access to online databases, at least in Latin America (1976). According to Dialog, it is the major online user of the region. This factor probably influenced the production of online databases, which are created under the policies of the National Committee of Databases funded by CONACYT. They follow a similar format, in most cases, developed using MINISIS software.

## 6. INFORMATION USE

It is assumed that any information policies are adopted to benefit information end-users. On the other hand, information policies cannot exist in a vacuum. They should be the result of national social policies, such as public education.

Mexico has increased the use and demand for information and library services in the last three decades Mexico's education efforts gained importance in the 60's and began to achieve more significant results since the 80's, when Mexico's literacy reached 90%. Without government efforts to raise literacy, libraries and other information providers would have no clientele.

Table 3

<b>INFORMATION POLICY MAKERS.</b>	
*	INEGI -- National Institute of Statistics, Geography, and Informatics (government statistics, census, social and economic data).
*	SECOFI - Ministry of Trade and Industrial Promotion.
*	SEP ---- Ministry of Public Education (University, public and school libraries).
*	BANCO DE MEXICO - Central bank (Macro-Economic statistics).
*	CONACYT National Council for Science and Technology (Scientific and Technological information).
*	SCT --- Ministry of Communications and Transport (Telecommunication policies).
*	Supreme Court - Jurisprudence.
*	Congress - Legislation.

The country has had an education policy focused on rising literacy among Mexicans in order to improve their living standards, which has affected libraries. These policies are shaped by educational demands in information services. Public libraries are geared toward school children, and university libraries develop their collection for short term loan. Special libraries act, on the other hand, as university libraries. They provide the complementary literature needed for undergraduate research work to almost any graduate student. Even the National Library, that is

managed by and located on the National University campus, is open to all types of university students. The number of researchers and scholars has also risen with the increased funding of education. Research is generally conducted by public universities, which depend on government funding. Privately financed research is negligible. Libraries either public, academic, or special, are mainly supported by government funds, with the exception of private university libraries.

## 7. NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

The importance and role of national information policies were discussed in a 1987 seminar organized by the Mexican National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) with the support of UNESCO, who financed this meeting [9]. Information advice were also discussed in different conferences, including meetings with the Mexican Congress, especially when the Mexican Constitution was reformed to state that every citizen has the right of access to information in 1983.

The lack of general information policies, the absence of a coordinating agency and the need for a legal framework for Mexican libraries Mexican has always been a concern of Mexican librarians [11]. This concern has been expressed through professional associations, like their counterparts in other countries [2,3,10]. Mexican library associations are small but active. AMBAC, the National Library Association, is the largest organization and has less than 1,000 members. This association has requested government legislate in regard to library services in several forums (See Table 4). Nevertheless, a national library plan has yet to be established, but legislation on some types of information services has been passed, like the public libraries act already discussed (See Table 1).

Table 4

<b>NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS</b>	
AMBAC -	Mexican Association of Librarians
ANBAGRO -	National Association of Agricultural Librarians
CNB -	National College of Certified Librarians
ABIESI -	Association of higher education and research librarians (not totally active).

## 8. LIBRARY MANAGEMENT

In order to better understand how Mexican information policies are scattered, it is necessary to analyze the different types of libraries and the way they are managed. There are government agencies in charge of setting information policies and in some cases, even administrating whole library networks, such public university libraries and public libraries.

ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: Mexico has, basically, three types of academic libraries, from universities, polytechnics and private higher education institutions. Universities, financed by the government, are incorporated into the Program for the Modernization of Higher Education (FOMES). The program provides funds to these institutions to increase collections, acquire information technology equipment and build libraries. FOMES sets university library policies all over the country. This policy-making and influence has helped to improved university library services, as several universities neglect library funding. In other words, centralization in these institutions has been positive, so far.

There are 80 polytechnical institutions financed by the government. All of them are under the umbrella of a general office. Library policies are established by the office headquarters in Mexico City. Libraries or information centers, as they are called, have similar information services, including the same types of buildings across the country. Centralized decision-making in this network has not proved to be completely successful as polytechnical libraries work in isolation from one another in building collections and in providing information services.

Private higher education institutions, such as universities and polytechnics of creating their information services at their own will. The Ministry of Public Education regulates their creation and the awarding of university degrees, but fails to regulate minimum library standards.

Table 5

<b>MAIN NETWORKS</b>	
SEP -	3000 public library networks
-	80 Polytechnic library systems
-	Public university libraries
INEGI -	Government statistics/data/information
CONACYT -	Science and technology information centers
-	Access to foreign online databases
-	National online database standards and policies

PUBLIC AND SCHOOL LIBRARIES: SEP is in charge of the Public Library Network. It finances and manages more than 4,500 libraries, a library system that is the largest library network in Latin America. Library policies, collection development, acquisitions and technical processing is conducted at the headquarters in Mexico City. However, SEP is also in charge of all primary, junior and junior high schools in the country, where libraries are almost non-existent. These libraries are greatly underdeveloped, which is ironic as they are also part of SEP.

The only explanation for this uneven library development is the SEP's lack of information policies as well as the country as a whole. Children fail to acquire good reading habits at the time they learn how to read, wasting part of the economic resources of the country by training pupils with poor reading skills.

SPECIAL LIBRARIES: Most of these centers, like their counterparts of other countries, are part of organizations which develop their own information policies. However, university and research centers of science and technology libraries fall under the policies of the National Council of Science and Technology (S&T) CONACYT which was founded by decree in 1970, with the responsibility of creating a national information system. As part of this responsibility, CONACYT sent many students to study library and information science abroad. Most information professionals with a foreign degree were trained under this program. This council undertook by law the function of creating a S&T information centers' network. Another function of CONACYT was to promote the creation of online databases under general policies dictated by a national committee.

## 9. PRIVATE SECTOR

The private information sector completely lacks information policies. This is probably the only sector where policies to guide their activities are non-existent. Private information providers lack some form of a legal framework, or a financing agency to regulates their activities through funding. There does not exist an association or chamber of private information providers. Information services in the private sector evolve according to their customer needs. The major companies in the country are INFOSEL, Mercamétrica, INFOTEC, El Financiero, and services provided by chambers of commerce (See Table 6). Several of these organizations offer information services to companies and the government itself.

The lack of some sort of information policy in the private sector is due to the small amount of organizations marketing information services. Business information, however, is a thriving sector. It is growing faster than services to the academic community.

Recently, new services and information products have been created, due to information demand from businesses. The opening of the Mexican economy to foreign companies has fostered the growth of business information. CD-ROMs and online services, as well as printed data, now cover now new information fields in business information.

The private sector transmits information through computer networks according of their own needs. As mentioned earlier, government dictates only telecommunication policies. The major companies, including some state enterprises, are the ones that set "de facto" data transmission policies. Such is the case of PEMEX, which is the largest buyer of computer and telecommunication equipment in the country, followed by The National Commission of Electricity. Both organization have the largest computing networks in the country. Their decisions become to a great extent, the norm for other smaller companies. The Federal Commission of Electricity (CFE) has, for example, a Xmodem.25 network which links nearly 6,000 computers around the country. Therefore, it is wise for smaller companies to buy standard equipment and software if they want to benefit from of larger companies experiences, and to network their hardware.

Table 6

<b>PRIVATE INFORMATION SERVICES' LEADERS</b>	
INFOSEL	Major business news service
EL FINANCIERO	Business news services
Mexican Stock Exchange	Public companies' financial information
Mercamétrica.	Compilation of reference business sources
Chambers of commerce	Trade directories
Industry associations	Compilation of company directories
INFOTEC	Most important business information center

## **10. NEED OF INFORMATION POLICIES**

Mexico has had some progress in attaining information development, but this could have been achieved more quickly and efficiently, if it had a national information policy. Predetermined goals, basic information principles or assumptions of planned programs of action can better guide the information pursuits of a country [7].

Their understanding of what a country aims to achieve can avoid a duplication of efforts, since channels of communication can be established [1,4] (See Table 7).

Coordination of information programs can mean better use of economic and human resources. So far, Mexico's public libraries have limited interaction with school libraries. On the other hand, both types of library centers are faced with uneven development, despite the fact that both belong to the same Ministry.

Table 7

<b>1. DEMAND OF INFORMATION POLICIES</b>
Create standards of services and information sources.
Have a stronger voice in financing bodies.
Coordinate national information activities.
Foster cooperation and exchange of information.
Compile national reference sources.

Mexico also requires an information coordinating body that does not to manage library networks but dictates policies and facilitates. This agency could encourage cooperation and the exchange of information, a basic function in libraries and information centers. This type of coordinating body could help in the creation of standards and specifications for information products and services. It could also serve as an ombudsman between information centers and funding bodies.

## 11. CONCLUSIONS

1. Despite Mexico's political and economic centralization, the country lacks an information policy, a blueprint that has been demanded by library organizations.

2. Information policies are set by a group dispersed government agencies, some as result of decrees and others because of funding they provide to certain information agencies.

3. The three most important policy-making bodies are SEP, INEGI and CONACYT. SEP defines policies for public universities through financing programs for libraries and computer networks, as well as controlling and financing the national network of public libraries and school libraries. INEGI is in charge of collecting and distributing government statistics, and CONACYT is in charge of setting up science and technology information policies.

4. Centralization is counter productive in some library cases, but as a whole, it has helped to improve the provision of library and information services as in the case of university libraries and access to online services.

5. Despite Mexico achievement in information development, there is a need for a national body that controls information activities, sets national information policies and coordinate the efforts of different national bodies that regulate information services. A body of this type could create standards, avoid duplication of efforts and provide a stronger voice in government funding organizations. Similar activities are needed in regard to fostering cooperation in the exchange of information and the compilation of regional and national reference sources.

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