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Theme: Sailing the treacherous seas of digital government information: from pamphlet boxes to digital libraries

Management and Planning Organization of Iran: Official Publications

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ABSTRACT

The Management and Planning Organization (MPO), formerly the Plan and Budget Organization, is one of the largest governmental establishments in Iran. It has three main types of publications: Legal, Technical and Economical.

Legal publications cover most major governmental documents and are distributed nationwide. They include country's budget that is prepared and printed by MPO and presented to the President of Republic. Technical publications include standards, prices, and specifications for materials that are revised annually and also reports on the evaluation of development projects. Economic publications cover diverse economical reports, including assessment of the current economic situation and forecasts for future national and international growth.

The Management and Planning Organization has moved all major publishing activities to digital media with a central library acting in support. The move started in 2001 with the presentation of the Third Development Plan, 2003 budget proposal and other related items on CD ROMs. It has continued with the growth of electronic publishing throughout the organization. More recently, MPO has started full text presentation of its publications on the Internet and has initiated plans to convert many of its highly valued past documents to digital format.

In this paper, implementation of government policies by the Management and Planning Organization of Iran, in general, and those related to Internet and intranet, in particular, are presented. New challenges, difficulties encountered, infrastructure put in place and future plans for electronic publishing are discussed. The paper also makes a brief voyage of discovery into digital libraries; describing how many of the past problems have been solved and how new challenges have surfaced.

1- Introduction

Like most developing countries, Iran places a great emphasis on long-term development plans. As from 1948 all responsibilities for the preparation of the country's budget have been centralized in a single organization called the Plan and Budget Organization (the first name: Plan Org.). Lately, the State Organization for Administrative and Employment Office has been combined with the PBO and the new organization is called the Management and Planning Organization (MPO). MPO is directly attached to the President's office.

The goals and duties of the MPO are multiple, ranging from the evaluation of the country's resources, the preparation of its medium and long term development plans and policies, the preparation of annual budgets, to the monitoring and evaluation of work done under the implemented plans.

In this paper, after a brief voyage of discovery into the digital libraries, we present the evolution of MPO's activities with time, focusing on the main objectives of the IFLA 2005 conference:

- How many kinds of information are being integrated
- What and how new government policies are being put into place to govern digital government information and the effects of the new policies
- New challenges and opportunities concerning the management and provision of digital government information

2- Digital Library: A Voyage of Discovery

It may seem like history but less than 20 years ago most advanced libraries in the world had hardly any digital documentation. Most libraries had and some may still have paper archiving systems. The books and periodicals were given identification numbers. Special location for each category was identified and books were placed in their respective shelves. The user had to go to the library and consult drawers of classed card files to identify books, reports or microforms (microfilm, microfiche ...). Later the possibility of working through the annual index or abstract of books was added.

Even then the library space was a problem. Most libraries had to move less essential items to sites outside the library and users had to request and wait for requested items to be brought back. Some libraries were tackling the problem of space with extensive use of microforms but still the users had first to find these microforms and then read them with a microfilm or microfiche reader, mostly available at the library.

The major risks were, then, the same as those in the middle ages: fire, flood, or other natural disasters. Preservation of the most precious documents consisted of placing them in special locations where humidity and lighting were controlled and access to the site restricted.

It may again seem far away, but not long ago the memory of microcomputers was only 64 k. When the first user-friendly commercial computer, with its graphical interface and icons and mouse, appeared in 1986, it only had 1 MB RAM. In fact, the whole computer operating system could be placed on a single floppy. People were delighted when the capacity of floppies moved from 400 k to 800 k and then to 1.4 MB. Students were saving their total work on a single floppy. It was then that today's feared words such as: bad sector, virus, worm, Trojan horse, ... started to take meaning.

In those days, there was a clear distinction between micro-computers (personal computers), mini-computers and the main frames. Today, some PCs have surpassed the older main frames in terms of calculation power and arrays of hard disks can store the data for a full library.

2- New Challenges

As briefly explained above, many of the past concerns and difficulties are solved in our digital era. The user does not need to go to a library to consult the articles. This can be done from a PC in office or at home. The user is not limited to one local library; vast number of information centers can be reached through the Internet. Gone are the old filing systems, today on-line databases are providing easy access to documents. The problem of space is also solved; on the one hand with the replacement of large books such as encyclopedia with their digital version, see e.g.

references 1-3, and on the other hand with the availability of larger and larger digital storage supports.

As a result, most, if not all, countries, and ahead of them the government establishments, are moving the bulk of their publishing activities and archives to digital formats. A good example of this is available at The Library of Congress / American Memory Internet web site (4) which also shows solutions employed to face new challenges. Parts of such solutions can be generalized, but some challenges are specific to individual countries and require local solutions.

For instance, the presentation of the materials through an efficient user-friendly system is a common goal. Yet for countries whose language cannot directly benefit from the large selection of already available software such presentations are more difficult. Often, indigenous software has to be developed to address specific problems.

The accurate translation of services and documents to other languages is on the surface a straightforward job. In reality however, it is much easier to translate from English to French or German than from languages whose grammar and text are different. Regular updating of information and keeping track of changes is also more difficult if the available infrastructure or technology in the country is not well developed.

The expansion of paying services also depends on the development of computerized banking systems, availability of e-commerce, credit cards, or even stable currency exchange rates which are not necessarily available in all countries.(6)

Probably the most time consuming activity, when moving to a digital library, is the digitization of original paper documents, microforms, photographs, etc. Scanning articles and books and presenting them in a Portable Document Format is a solution adopted by many organizations, but these documents do not have the flexibility of a typed text with editable equations, tables and figures. As an alternative solution, one can use an OCR (Optical Character Recognition) software to convert scanned documents to text and images, but the level of error for Farsi documents is too high (as high as 30%) to allow a significant saving in time. In addition, even when the

margin of error is less than 1%, small mistakes in numbers or formulae could make the whole scanned document useless.

The reason for a higher degree of error in Farsi language is not due to the quality of software but to the written Farsi text. For instance, a major source of error in recognition of English text is the dot on the i or in French the accent on letters such as e (e, é, è, ê) that can be confused with artifacts on the paper. The reader in most cases has no problem recognizing such errors and reading the text correctly (in fact these dots and accents can be left out in capital letters). In Farsi writing, a letter such as h (ح), if it takes a dot above becomes kh (خ pronounced like ch in loch ness), if it takes a dot below becomes J (ج), and if it takes three dots below becomes ch (چ as in Church). A similar situation exists for several other letters.

Short and long-term preservation of large quantities of digitized information is another challenge. Making regular backups and keeping separate copies of digitized documents are common precautions. What is probably less thought about is that important backups should be kept in geographically separate sites and on independent machines and software.

Finally, with the possibility of accessing or copying large quantities of information instantly over the Internet, the theft of information has become a grave matter of concern, particularly for government organizations. Protecting the information database through encoding, using firewalls and other barriers is receiving more and more attention.

In conclusion, today's library is very different from the past. It has overcome many of the past challenges but the move to digital media has brought new ones. The required qualifications for library staff have changed and the librarians have become main actors in the field of information science and technology.

3- Implementation of Government Policies at MPO

Noting the importance of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the Iranian government in 2002 set up a special plan, called TAKFA (Iran's Applied

Development of Information and Communication Technology Plan), for its nationwide expansion. The plan calls for:

- Investments in main ICT infrastructure such as LAN and WAN.
- Support for establishment of different websites.
- Encouragement of governmental and non-governmental organizations to move to digital environment.

To achieve the above goals, a dedicated budget line has been opened for TAKFA that amounts to 25% of the current budget of government organizations. Examples of utilization of this budget, in terms of the percentage of TAKFA contribution, are: 50% for the establishment of digital libraries, 70% for an Iranian book information databank, and 80% for specific websites in scientific, technical and religious fields (see e.g. MPO website www.mporg.ir)

MPO as one of the main organizations in the TAKFA plan has played an important role in its implementation. MPO is installing a national Internet portal that provides direct links to all national websites whose numbers have currently exceeded 1000. (5). In addition, MPO has moved most of its own major publishing activities to digital media. The move started in 2001 with presentation of the Third Development Plan on CD-Rom and has continued since with those of the budget and other economical publications. Along with these moves, the possibility of the growth of electronic publishing is being exploited. Today, most of these publications are archived in a central library and some of them are available on the Internet to international users (<http://www.mporg.ir>). However, the Farsi section of the site is well developed while the English section is still under construction.

4- MPO Central Library and Publications

MPO Central Library is a key element in the organization's strategy for implementation of digital transition. The central library, not only has a full collection of the MPO's publications, but also has a large collection of books and documents (over 110000) and journals (over 500 titles). The digital section of the library is well developed, as are the reproduction facilities. MPO library is a member of Depository

library of UNESCO's IIEP and has a collection of all their publications since 1978. It is also a member of library relevant international organizations such as IFLA and subscribes to most information databases.

Most items in the central library are classified and indexed and are accessible through Internet search engines. While older and more important documents are kept in the museum section. A list of these documents is available on the MPO Internet site.

All above documents and facilities are at the disposal of library users.

4.1. MPO publication database

MPO has three main types of publications: Legal, Technical and Economic.

Legal publications cover most major governmental publications and are distributed nationwide. The main publication in this category is the country's budget that is prepared and printed by MPO and presented to the President of Republic.

Technical publications include standards, prices, and specifications for materials that are revised annually. The technical publications also include reports on evaluation of development projects.

Economic publications cover diverse economic reports. They include reports on the socio-economic situation of the country, the economic performance of the country during the current fiscal year, and national and international economic growth projections.

As from 1984, MPO has been collecting and archiving all MPO publications dating as far back as 1948. A first set of collection was released in printed format in 1984, entitled "MPO Publication List 1948-1983". The work has continued since with the release of 13 other volumes covering up to 1999.

With the development of ICT, all documents have been indexed and entered in relevant databases. Today, the MPO Publication database contains about 18000 bibliographic and abstract records and the intention is to link these to full text digital documents.

Since the introduction of advanced online search facilities in the library, there has been a significant increase in the number of consultations. The ease of consultation together with the availability of reproduction facilities has contributed to user satisfaction. The library is currently working on its own dedicated website and is expanding its technical publications database. Preparation of rules and regulations for e-publishing is also underway.

4.2. MPO Special Collection (CHIZAR)

This archive was established in 1971 and contains a large number of valuable and unique collections of development plans and projects and their associated original attachments. The CHIZAR collection is regarded as a national heritage and its high technical and legal values attract many executive managers, consulting engineers, contractors, researchers, etc. interested in the country's development plans.

It contains 16541 projects (80,000 Volumes) and 18286 Maps (200,000 Sheets). Most of the archived items are in Farsi, but some are bilingual and some also in a foreign language, especially English. The collection is indexed and divided into 42 subject categories.

In 2002 and in line with TAKFA policy, noting the high value of these documents, MPO decided to convert the CHIZAR archive to digital format. The transition started in February 2004 and is expected to finish in February 2006. The final version will contain all documents in full text and full image digital formats and will be available through the Internet to users (7)

5- Conclusions

In response to government policy of modernization of information technology, the Management and Planning Organization of Iran has moved most of its publication to digital format and has expanded the activities of its central library to support advanced digital technology. Today, users can directly access these documents through the Internet.

Significant effort is also in progress to convert large number of old and highly valued documents to digital format. Likewise, the translation of many documents from Farsi into other languages is in progress.

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