

## **"Wired Hong Kong doesn't understand the true value of information" by Waltraut Ritter**

Waltraut Ritter says lack of access to public data hurts competitiveness

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Is Hong Kong a much less developed information society than officials would have us believe? The two recent reports by the Ombudsman about the access to information regime and public records management should be taken as a serious warning.

The quality of any records management system decides whether citizens trust or doubt government data. Interestingly, the Ombudsman's reports reveal a completely different picture of where Hong Kong stands compared with the government's Digital 21 strategy, its blueprint for information and communications technology development. The 2014 update is titled "Smarter Hong Kong, Smarter Living".

The blueprint says Hong Kong ranks highly in technological infrastructure such as fast broadband connectivity, mobile phone penetration and general availability of information.

The latest version introduces the concept of "openness by default", meaning that all information produced by public agencies should be machine-readable, accessible and free.

Why the disconnect between the aspirations of the Digital 21 strategy advocated by the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau and the backwardness of the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau handling the code on access to information? It seems the two bureaus are not collaborating and have completely different views on the role of information in Hong Kong's social and economic development.

Based on various international rankings monitoring the knowledge economy, Hong Kong consistently ranks high on information technology, but low on access to, and transparency of, government information.

The latest Open Data Index, which tracks information openness, transparency and accountability of governments across 70 economies, ranks Hong Kong 59th, well behind Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

The absence of specific access to information laws not only lowers Hong Kong's international competitiveness, but also increases the risk of missing out on economic opportunities.

Perhaps the Ombudsman's remark that the government's bureaus and departments "do not fully understand the spirit and the letter" of the code on access to information explains the real information challenge - there is nobody in the administration willing to champion a new understanding of the value of information for the development of Hong Kong.

Looking at information only from either a technological or administrative perspective is not enough - a new mindset is needed to understand all aspects of information.

In this digital age, governments around the world are undergoing fundamental changes in their records and data management practices.

Yet, the response of our government to the Ombudsman's findings shows a lack of any new thinking. Officials also overlooked one of the most critical remarks by the Ombudsman - that the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau is not a suitable agency to deal with the development of access to information laws in the first place, as it is not independent and therefore not in a position to develop future-oriented policies.

Creating the best environment for an open and accountable government requires new forms of collaboration between citizens, business and government, or, as the Ombudsman put it, new channels of involvement from stakeholders outside government.

Waltraut Ritter is a member of the government's Digital 21 strategy advisory committee

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