Government information: Literacies, behaviours and practices

Maureen Henninger
University of Technology Sydney, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, PO Box 123, Broadway, NSW 2007, Australia

Abstract
The current trend in liberal democracies for online delivery of government information and services to facilitate participatory democracy on e-democracy is predicated on several assumptions on the parts of both the providers and the users of this information. At its most essential level, the provider selects and publishes information on its website and citizens, the users, find it and use it. The equation is simple but fraught with complexities, misconceptions and mistakes in the understandings and expectations of the actors; these stem from suppositions about institutional and user practices and the literacy skills that are required for participation in democratic processes. As we shall see these practices and literacies—information, digital and civic—converge around the concept of accessibility to government information.

The open government movement (OGM) of the first part of the 21st century, which evolved from earlier right to information movements (Halooen, 2012) and their belief that citizens and civil societies have a right to government-held information and open data (public sector information), holds out the promise of enhanced transparency, accountability and collaborative government (Meijer, Curtin, & Hillebrandt, 2012). Underpinning this rhetoric and practice is the assumption that citizens are both civically and digitally literate. The first is the knowledge, ability and capacity that enable them to make sense of their political world and to act effectively as members of their communities (Mihler, 2002). The second is multifaceted and closely aligned with information literacy; it includes the capacity to find and retrieve digital information (Bosved, 2001), to interpret and critically evaluate it (Limberg, Sundin, & Taiga, 2013), an ability that Ira Shor (1999) defines as critical literacy.

Australia, as part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2008, p. 4 n.1), considers public sector information (PSI) to be information products and services, generated, created, collected, processed, preserved, maintained, disseminated or funded by or for the Government or public institutions. The recommendations of the Government 3.0 Taskforce noted that access to this information would “maximise its economic and social value to Australians and reinforce its contribution to a healthy democracy” (Green, 2009, p. 22); further, it must be easily “discoverable, accessible and usable” (Green, 2009, p. 60). McMillan (2011, p. 4), writing as the Information Commissioner, noted that the Commonwealth Government’s first principle of open public sector information accepted the Taskforce’s recommendation that “open access to information [is the] default position.” It is primarily the concept of findability and accessibility that are the concerns of this paper; however although usability in the context of PSI is generally assumed to mean the information or data is published in an “open and standards-based format and is machine-readable” (McMillan, 2011, p. 34), it should be considered a component of accessibility.

This paper uses a case study approach to explore a government agency’s information access policy and its subsequent outcomes, by investigating the extent to which specific documents were findable and accessible two and a half years after the information was mandated to