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

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The current trend in the delivery of government information online is predicated on the belief that it will enable improvements in the provision of government services and citizens' participation in democratic processes. Government policy in this matter is wrapped in the rhetoric of public accessibility, that is, it must be easy to find, to access and to use. This paper draws upon a case study to explore the validity of this rhetoric; it uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of society as a metaphorical game in which different players, government and citizens, play with different rules, a situation that can result in mismatches and conflicts in expectations and beliefs. Societal understanding of accessibility to government information is more nuanced and multidimensional than accessibility as an institutional practice within government departments, and requires high levels of digital and civic literacies. The case study findings demonstrate that accessibility did not meet the expectations of a group of university students who were both digitally and civically literate but were not able to find documents mandated to be published. The research concludes that there is a gap between the assumptions of the providers of government information and the expectations of their users; this disparity raises issues of social justice that will need to be bridged if government policies for online information delivery are to fulfil their objectives and rhetoric.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The current trend in liberal democracies for online delivery of government information and services to facilitate participatory democracy or 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 mismatches 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 (Halonen, 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

(Milner, 2002). The second is multifaceted and closely aligned with information literacy; it includes the capacity to find and retrieve digital information (Bawden, 2001), to interpret and critically evaluate it (Limberg, Sundin, & Talja, 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 2.0 Taskforce noted that access to this information would "maximise its economic and social value to Australians and reinforce its contribution to a healthy democracy" (Gruen, 2009, p. 22); further, it must be easily "discoverable, accessible and useable" (Gruen, 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 concepts of findability and accessibility that are the concern of this paper; however although usability in the context of PSI is generally construed 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

E-mail address: maureen.henninger@uts.edu.au.