Government information: Literacies, behaviours and practices

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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.

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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

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be published and be accessible to the public, in this instance a class of undergraduate university students. The case study is shaped within the conceptual framework of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *illusio*, the rules of the game.

2. The rules of the game

Bourdieu in his social theory described society metaphorically as a game played in a setting or *field* by players or actors who are individuals, groups and institutions. The game follows rules that are not necessarily explicit or codified, but the explicit requirement of playing the game is the notion of *illusio*, how the game is played, its rules, expectations and practice sense (Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992); the player has a practical mastery of these rules, although not necessarily through natural abilities, but learned through interest and inclination. Bourdieu theorises that society is made up of many fields—religious, educational, juridical, bureaucratic et cetera—and that the players in these fields have diverse interests each of which has a specific *illusio* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Within this framework I have placed government information as a product of the bureaucratic field in which there are many players, including the "government", the providers and the students, the users, each of whom may be playing with different rules and expectations.

In Bourdieusian terms the bureaucratic field contains many subfields which have a degree of autonomy, for example individual departments, and agencies such as National Libraries or National Archives. However Bourdieu argues that these institutions are included in an overarching field of power—a meta-field, which "constitutes the state as the holder of a sort of meta-capital granting power" (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 4). The meta-field and its statist power dictates the rules of access to government information; these consist of four primary legislative mechanisms, the Archives Act 1983, the Freedom of Information Act (FOI) 1982, the Australian Information Commissioner Act 2010, and section 201 legal deposit of the Copyright Act 1968. As well there is the regulatory Machinery of Government (MoG) Guidelines under the Public Service Act of 1999 that specifies implementation strategies.

The first of these legislative mechanisms, the Archives Act 1983, requires all commonwealth government documents and administrative records, including departmental websites, must be deposited in the Australian National Archives. As well, copies of government websites must be sent to the National Archives when departments change names or responsibilities; the Machinery of Government guidelines specify the procedures and timeframes. However, the open access period for this material is 20 years after deposit and therefore not accessible by the public other than through FOI requests, which are not necessarily free of charge, nor are they always granted. There is, however another mechanism by which government enables more immediate public accessibility if documents for some reason are no longer available on the current website. This is the legal deposit section of the Copyright Act that requires all commonwealth government documents be deposited in the National Library, although as Cunningham and Phillips (2005) have pointed out "the publications of some Australian government agencies are already difficult to locate, being moved willy-nilly from one site to another, as agencies change name and functions are shifted from one department to another." It remains to be seen if the 2015 amendment to the Act to include digital documents increases the findability of government documents.

Within the context of the case study the most relevant legislative mechanism is the Freedom of Information Act 1982 s8(1) and s8(2) that states government departments and agencies must publish on their websites an Information Publication Scheme (IPS) that lists ten classes of information, including documents and submissions related to departmental inquiries. Under this legislation it is implied that the act of publishing content on the website constitutes the practice of making it accessible to the public; ipso facto presumed to be easily discoverable and useable—the *illusio* of the users. This assumption is facile since

among many of the consequent factors it assumes that users are literate in any or all of its connotations. The following section explores the relationship between accessibility and literacies.

3. Accessibility and literacies

Accessibility of information is far more multidimensional and multi-perspective than simple discoverability and usability. Scholars over the years have suggested that several types of accessibility factors are involved in the provision of information services to citizens:

1) societal, the need to provide certain types of information within the social system;
2) institutional, organisations have the capability and willingness to provide resources;
3) bibliographic, the extent to which resources are collected and described;
4) psychological, the individual's willingness to approach and obtain information from appropriate sources;
5) intellectual, an individual's skills and ability; and
6) physical access to the resources (Dervin, 1973).

Information services that do not implement strategies that give serious consideration to each of these factors are not providing universal accessibility. This is a position re-iterated and modelled by Van Dijk & Van Deursen (2010, p. 279) in their argument that access is a successive process with many social, mental, motivational and technological causes, that "material [physical] access was preceded by motivational access and succeeded by skills access and usage access". This taxonomy of accessibility intersects and interleaves with the levels of information, digital and civic literacies of citizens that government information policies and rhetoric assume to be present.

Information literacy is a concept first articulated by Paul Zurkowski (1974, p. 6) as "people trained in the application of information resources to their work can be called information literates. They have learned techniques and skills for utilizing the wide range of information tools as well as primary sources in molding information-solutions to their problems". Since then information literacy has been described in the Alexandria Proclamation of 2005 as the "beacons of the Information Society, illuminating the courses to development, prosperity and freedom. Information literacy empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals. It is a basic human right in a digital world and promotes social inclusion in all nations" (UNESCO, 2005). More pragmatically it has been considered as the ability to be able to understand, interpret, assess texts, evaluate statements and think critically (Limberg et al., 2013). As foreshadowed by UNESCO, in the second decade of the 21st century, literacy in a *digital* environment has become essential.

The understanding of digital literacy has developed considerably since Glister described it as "the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers" (Glister, 1997, p. 1). By 2001 it included the capacity to find and retrieve digital information (Bawden, 2001), and lately it has been suggested that digital literacy is the "capabilities required to thrive in an age where digital forms of information and communication dominate. …[and] involve sourcing, using, evaluating, analysing, aggregating, recombining, creating and releasing knowledge online" (Littlejohn, Beetham, & McGill, 2012, p. 547). Tied in with digital literacy is the notion of digital citizenship, which is very much part of current government policy; it is the ability to participate in society online (Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008) and indeed recent work skills reports suggest that to be a citizen is to be digital in order to communicate, find information or purchase goods/services, that is, to be information and digitally literate (UK Digital Skills Workforce, 2014). In Australia it has been calculated that over 37% (almost 4.5 m) of the Australian labor force in the next 2–5 years would fall into this category