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Access to Government Information: Right to Information and Open Government Data Synergy

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Abstract

The right to information springs from the right to expression under the notion that in order for an individual to be able to freely express ideas, opinions and thoughts, it should be able to freely formulate them, hence to be very well informed. The Right to Information (RTI) movement focuses on the fact that government information is being collected for the benefit of the public, and not for the benefit of the organisations themselves, and it constitutes the basis of a democratic regime. On the other hand, Open Government Data (OGD) refers to data produced or commissioned by government or government controlled entities, which can be freely used, reused and redistributed by anyone. The core of OGD movement lays into the proactive dissemination of unstructured raw data aiming firstly to innovation and economic growth by exploiting the given data to produce new products with added value, and secondly to accountability and transparency by providing access to data that bears political value on the way governments and administrations work. This paper attempts to present the underlined ideology of these two movements, which have fashioned the access to government information and to substantiate that the way to the future is a one-way street towards the greatest possible dissemination of government information as this can be established by the synergy of RTI and OGD in order to preserve and promote the primary human and political right to receive information so as to be informed and able to freely express opinions, ideas and thoughts.

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1. Introduction

Governments and public administrations worldwide produce immense amounts of information in order to execute their operational tasks on one hand, as well as during the interaction with any interested entity, namely the citizens or the enterprises on the other hand. This type of information –assembled by data concerning financial, taxation, social security, health, education, religion etc.– is collected and stored by government bodies in all levels of administration either by electronic means or as print archives. Nonetheless, the availability and access to government information should be top priority for every government regardless the employed method of collection, storage and dissemination.

The term “government information” –even though used within the academia and information professional for many years now— is not very lucid for the average individual. One aspect has to do with the inherent secrecy that accompanies public administrations and the many examples of opaque practices of operation adopted throughout history. The most recent cases of Edward Swonden leaking top-secret details on the US and UK governments’ mass surveillance programs or this of Julian Assange, co-founder WikiLeaks, evince that there is some truth to the “conspiracy scenarios”.

During the last few years governments worldwide have been shifting towards adopting a more open, transparent and accountable form of governance. This shift is clearly captured into documents and policies such as the US Open Government Directive, the UK Open Data White Papers and the EU Open Strategy. The notion of open government is not new, but instead dates back to World War II as a result of the opacity of operations the US administration had enshrined during the War (Yu and Robinson, 2012). However, the discussion of opening up the administrative procedures making governments’ and public administrations’ workings more transparent and, thus, accountable, and simultaneously inviting the public to be more participative, was enacted again somewhere in the middle of 2000s as a result firstly of the opacity adopted after the 9/11 attacks on the grounds of anti-terrorism and crime fight, and secondly under the pressure that the immense public outcry on these practices induced.

2. Government information

The core of opening up both governments’ and administrations’ procedures is to grant access to government information either by introducing more liberal working mentality to the administration, or by lessening the restrictions, or by the combination of both. A very generic definition of government information is “*the information generated, collected, maintained, managed and held by public organizations during the performance their operational tasks*” (Allen, 1992; Birkinshaw, 1997; Meijer & Thaens, 2009; European Commission, 2011). In that sense, government information bears several inherent characteristics within which its importance lays such as it offers authentic and reliable documentation of the administrative acts of any public organization, it serves as the means of communication between the government and the citizens by formulating a framework of the rights and obligations, it encloses an inherent economic value, as it contributes to the economic development, as none entrepreneurial activity can be accomplished without accurate information on specific subjects and fields, it increases the accountability and transparency of public officials and government as a whole, as citizenry has better knowledge and, therefore, control of the activities of its governmental representatives, it strengthens democracy by forming better informed and active citizens, who are more involved into the decision-making processes and exercise better control, and it serves as the “written” memory of public administration as it depicts the history and the general context that public administration has been evolved throughout the years and enables researchers to impartially review and evaluate the decisions of a government based on objective and reliable resources (Strates, 2004).

Furthermore, Hernon (1991) characterises the access to government information as “...*is an inherent right or part of the social contract between government and the governed to hold government accountable to its citizenry*”, or as James Madison, 4th President of US, extremely prophetic stated in 1822 that “*a popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And a people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives*” (Peled & Rabin, 2011, p. 360).

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