

Information Sharing as a Democratic Tool

Thomas B. Riley

Commonwealth Centre for E-Governance and Riley Information Services, Canada

William Sheridan

Commonwealth Centre for E-Governance and Informetrica Limited, Canada

... the degree to which organization members at each level in an organization have a reason to be willing to share information is often the single most important factor in the design of any e-governance program. (Perri, 2004, p. 39)

INTRODUCTION

This section begins by looking at ways in which governments can facilitate better access to information in both the public and private sector. This is an important factor in the e-governance equation. Information sharing is an essential activity for government for any form of e-governance program to succeed, because information provides the evidence of a correspondence (or lack of correspondence) between policy and reality. The particular emphasis herein will be on the growing influence of the Internet and all the new, emerging communication technologies through which services can be delivered in all sectors of society. The role of the Internet and the growth of electronic democracy are briefly explored.

Part of the rhetoric of both information management and public consultation is the notion of information sharing. This concept is, in fact, one of the central tenants of knowledge management. Despite these good intentions, however, management gurus (Drucker, 1999) find themselves continually admonishing both organizations and knowledge workers of the need to share more information. Is there an information gap between colleagues, so that work is impeded or prevented because co-workers don't communicate with one another? And by the same token, is there an information gap between knowledge workers and the public, so that the public cannot make informed choices about important decisions?

The Role of Government

Governments are particularly interested in the answers to these questions, because they are held to a higher standard of accountability than the private sector, and any suspicion that strategic information is being intentionally

withheld is sure to further erode the sense of legitimacy people feel towards their governments. One can infer that some sort of information gap does occur, else there would be no need for continual injunctions to overcome it. Diagnosing why it occurs and how to cope with it has become a growth industry (Rumizen, 2001).

One reason for the existence of an information gap in governments is that neither the information holdings nor information management have been rationalized as computerization and digitization have grown (Milner, 2000). These sections of the bureaucracy have always felt both under-funded and understaffed, so they were struggling just to keep up with current requirements, never mind planning to do better. Professionals such as information and knowledge managers usually advocate that governments devote the resources and make the effort to be both more systematic and share more widely when it comes to the way information holdings are organized and the extent to which information outreach is practiced (i.e., keeping the public informed).

Data protection (also known as privacy laws in many countries) is currently the major information issue that covers both the public and private sector. In a very short period of time, we will likely see freedom-of-information expand from the conditions for access to government documents to encompass both the public and private sectors. Information best practices also need to be written to help the developing world. In an information-rich era, combined with the rise of the dominance of the Digital Age in many countries, great potential exists to democratize information at all levels of society throughout the world. Due to our new information technologies (ITs), information is not only a commodity to be bartered in the marketplace, but a potentially powerful democratic tool.

The Context of Information Sharing

The wide variety of practices leads to an important question: Is there an objective (i.e., politically neutral) way of assessing the actual value provided by governments when they share information with the public? Unfortunately, at this level of aggregation, the question is both

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too vague and too encompassing to elicit a meaningful answer. Nevertheless, the question can be deconstructed and dealt with in terms of its various aspects.

This is perhaps one of the most interesting times, given that we are undergoing an evolution as to how we live and operate as a society. We are witnessing a phenomenal rate of change in societies around the world in a very short period of time. Even as long as 11 years ago, a survey of IT showed that the global impact of computers and communications was already measurable and profound (Dordick & Wang, 1993). Both production and distribution in every industry are increasingly becoming mediated with electronic technologies. Access to information can enable both the tracking of processes already in motion and the altering of conditions about to unfold. Hence, the key to understanding and controlling social change is good information sharing.

Even while operating at less than full efficiency, the combination of computers and communications (i.e., the Internet) has transformed the quality of working life, social life and personal life to an extent that was probably never before experienced in human history (Buick & Jevtic, 1995). Everyone benefits through processes informed by more information and better information, even those individuals who do not personally use computers or have access to connectivity. So the information that supports the knowledge society has great potential to supply timely and correct evidence for both social and business policies. But the only way such benefits will actually accrue to society is if this knowledge is actually used to improve or change the conditions of peoples' lives. In other words, information must complement reform if things are going to improve for the better. Information by itself has no magical ability to stop pollution, prevent crime, create jobs or rectify injustice. Is the knowledge from the Internet used for these purposes? That can only be assessed on a country-by-country, community-by-community, case-by-case basis.

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Many countries have adopted explicit programs to put "Government Online" so that the layout of documents and navigability of government Web sites are more user-friendly (Nielsen, 2000). The rationale for these programs has been that as more of the public goes online, users of government information will not be happy if they can't find material that was promised or is expected because it is hidden as a result of poorly conceptualized categories or poorly organized hyperlinks. Considerable progress has been made on this

front to make document search intuitive so that average members of the public can navigate their way to whatever is available on government Web sites.

Whatever the opinions or views of individuals and governments in society, it is evident that we need a far deeper debate and discourse over the impacts of technologies. There are concerns over ensuring that all citizens have universal access to the Internet (and are free to use it or not use it as they wish); there are serious, abiding anxieties about the digital divide that is occurring throughout the world. One of Marshall McLuhan's lasting legacies is the recognition that the advent of technologies is not an unalloyed good—sometimes over-use can reverse the benefits that were intended.

The Need for Policies

As the Internet takes hold in our daily lives and begins to take a new and ubiquitous shape and form, the need for governments to develop information policies to suit the changing nature of these technologies is becoming more evident. The direction to be given to these policies can come from the simple maxim that people are entitled to receive information about anything that has a bearing on their well-being. The World Wide Web is now so big that some Web sites are not even getting joined to the network of networks because there might be a connection problem in their local area. Also, government and private organizations over the past few years have Web sites that can only be accessed through their own Intranets, or by having a specific address for a Web site with a password to enter. Google is an excellent search tool, but is only as good as the information it can access in the public domain.

The world is at the fingertips of the citizen, but the new challenge is actually finding what is out there and getting access to the vast amounts of information that both government Web sites and departmental databases possesses. The government of Canada is working to find ways to merge its databases to enable the citizen to take advantage of information stored by government. Many technical problems are being faced. This attempt to find ways to provide more information to the citizen reflects the desire to respond to a growing information-aware society.

THE SHAPE OF INFORMATION RIGHTS TO COME: DEMOCRACY'S BEST TOOL

Regarding the variety of information within government databases about existing policies and procedures, there

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