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Collaborative Information Literacy by Government

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Abstract
*Information literate governments are able to utilize information widely and effectively.
Government based on democratic principles share "empowering information" with the*

citizens via up-to-date services and publications. Comprehensive literacy by government covers information retrieval, assessment, interpreting, organizing, producing, distributing and sharing processes and skills.

Collaborative information literacy by government can be assessed by asking: How do governments read their environment? How accessible, usable and readable are government information assets? The aim of collaborative literacy is to change the role of the information professionals. The tasks emphasize the usability and architecture of information and the sharing of knowledge concerning information.

Introduction

Good morning. I´m very delighted to be here and I´d like to thank the Government Libraries Section of IFLA for giving me the chance to talk within the context of your theme: information literacy in a democracy.

My background involves 20 years experience as an Information Designer, Consultant and writer in the field of Information and Knowledge Management and Communications. I have been working for the Finnish government, research institutions, and various companies. During the last five years I have been developing further education for information professionals at the Helsinki University of Technology.

Together with my colleague Merja Karivalo, I have written a book in Finnish called Corporate Literacy[1], which focuses on the new, comprehensive literacy that companies need in our networked, fast changing and complex environment. Now I'm applying this concept to governments. I'm going to give an overview, why it is needed and what it means from the point of view of democracy. I'm also giving some questions for discussion, by which the concept of *Collaborative Literacy by Government* can be approached and assessed. I will also look at how this concept may lead to new professional roles and tasks for information specialists and information services provided by government. The value structure of the presentation reflects the Scandinavian concept of democracy: transparency of society, views from the perspective of the citizens, good governance[2] and access to information. My examples relate to the Finnish government.

Why is collaborative information literacy needed by government?

Globalisation, financial insecurity, political crises and environmental problems leave reverberations around the globe and also in the operational and decision-making environment. The world has "shrunk" and the links between the issues, the reason and the causal effects are complex, having a fast and often surprising effect. The media, the internet and mobile services offer continuous information and messages, weighing down human consciousness and thought and making it difficult to pick out the essential issues. The task of government in this continuously changing operational and information environment is to solve international, national and local problems, to plan for the future and to predict what the possible effects of the decisions made might be. The tasks of the government include the effective and efficient organisation of health, educational, social and infrastructural services for the citizens. In order to perform these tasks well, the government requires a solid and current, updated knowledge base and has to have access to the latest information from as wide a source as possible. Above all the government should be able to sieve the essential information, to interpret, to implement and to apply it to its decision-making and operations. New tasks and issues need to be tackled continuously in the changing world. Following rules and regulations in the manner of a bureaucratic organisation is not sufficient; what is required is the creation of new knowledge and innovation.[3]

In a democratic society preparation and decision-making relating to the issues at hand should be transparent. Both the realization of citizens' rights and accountability require that access to information is freely available. Information networks and e-government enable the transparency of the decision-making processes, the availability of documents and the possibility to influence the citizens even before the issues are finalised. In an open society the government has to actively disseminate information. Public information is common capital and a resource for all. In Finland the Act on the Openness of Government Activities[4] promotes openness and good practice in information management in government. The current Government Programme includes a citizens' participation policy programme, which is put into practice in many projects.

What kind of a concept is Collaborative Literacy?

"When learning to read, the eyes open and it becomes possible to see oneself and the world in a new light". This was once said by a woman, who had learnt to read as an adult. According to her "being literate you are able to follow what happens, and you know your rights".

The concept of Literacy is expanding and it can be viewed from very different perspectives: Information Literacy, Media Literacy, Visual Literacy, Digital Literacy, Legal Literacy, Scientific Literacy… Environment and Nature Literacy, Global Literacy… However, the core and the basic meaning of comprehensive literacy is still the same: The eyes open and you see yourself and the world in a new light. Literacy is the skill we activate to 'read', observe, interpret, understand, evaluate and negotiate the context within which we operate.


Information literacy skills can be seen as a multiple extension which relates to the total information acquisition, filtering, interpretation, production, communication and legal and ethical process irrespective of the technical or media form. In addition, information literacy can be viewed laterally in the different areas of information: literacy skills relating to different areas of science, to statistics, finance, advertising, politics, religions etc.

Mostly, when discussing information[5] or media literacy[6], the topic of discussion is the literacy of an individual person. A very wide-based literacy requirement can, however, be an unrealistic goal for individuals, even for the information specialists. The connection of a societal perspective to literacy would make the goal achievable.

Just like the individual, all the organisations, companies as well as public organizations and communities need a collaborative literacy. We do not manage alone in this networked environment. We need to share knowledge and learn together. Collaborative literacy is a concept for use by a transparent, networked and democratic society. It can be seen as a part and basis for good governance.

How government reads its environment?
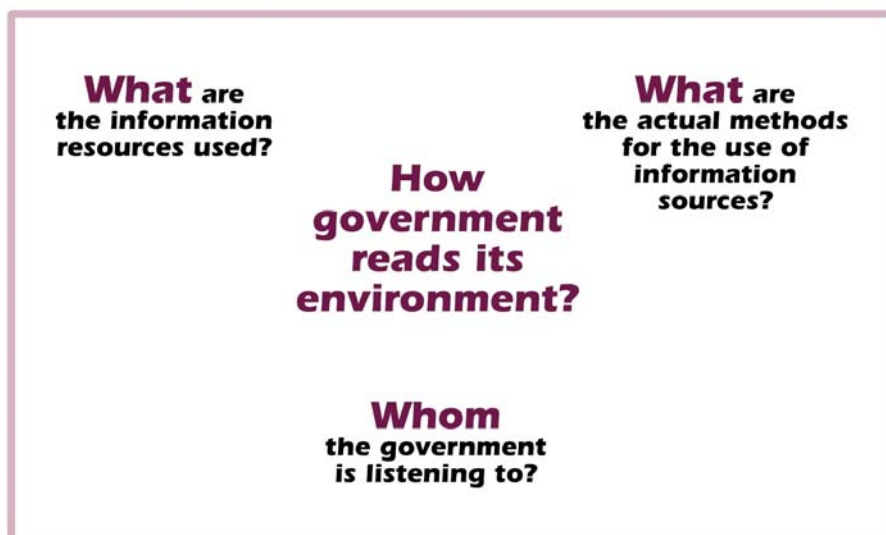
When considering the current tasks and operating environment it is important to ask how the government is currently reading its environment. What are the information resources upon which decisions are prepared and made? The government itself produces information: statistics, memos, reports, background analyses. This is important but is often based on a compromise, may have a political bias and may present a narrow view of the society.

For the implementation of democracy it is also important to know whom the government is listening to. Are the unemployed being listened to in matters relating to employment? Are old people being listened to in matters relating to their care? The internet increased radical possibilities for direct interaction between the government and citizens. To be alive, democracy needs public forums for public discussions. The aim in Finland is to obtain information relating to citizens and their views for example for the preparation of legislation via a citizens' internet discussion forum[7]. The ministers visit the forum, answer questions and discuss with the citizens.

Globalisation requires literacy relating to different regions and cultures even more widely than previously. Governmental units operate often in metropolises and therefore they have to pay special attention to their ability to read peripheries, their environment and population.

It is important to analyse the actual methods for the use of information sources as the the information environment has changed. Previously it was perhaps a colleague which was the first port of call to ask information from, now it could well be google.com instead. Easy access to superficial surface information is misleading. Information searching skills, the understanding of internet structures and the critical evaluation of information requires a lot of training throughout the whole society, including civil servants and decision-makers.

The influence of the media as regards the formation of information is significant. The time spent daily by the population, particularly in the western world, being engaged with media, is quite a few hours. Messages are sent 24 hours a day in public transport, in shops, on the streets. Those working for the government are as vulnerable to commercial

communication as other citizens. The media and brands are integrated into new information, news and even research. The ethical restrictions of journalism have been fading as regards commercial communication. In the sound bite types of news the language is often ambiguous and the references relating to resources are not stated clearly. Those working for the government should be highly skilled - LITERATE - in their ability to read the media and able to interpret critically commercial, political and other hidden messages.

Positive and negative information

Information offers a tool for good and bad: for democracy and a police state. It is possible to use effectively obtained information and to use it responsibly for the development of the society, but it can also be misused. If information is widely used for surveillance of citizens, even under the name of security, it creates a threat to the society and citizens' rights. Special emphasis should be laid on the juridical and ethical use of information. Collaborative literacy means responsible literacy and should also prevent the misuse of information. However, accurate information is not always welcomed by the government or in favour of it. Genuine democracy will also make visible the negative effects of the current politics.

How accessible, usable, readable and intelligible are the government information assets?
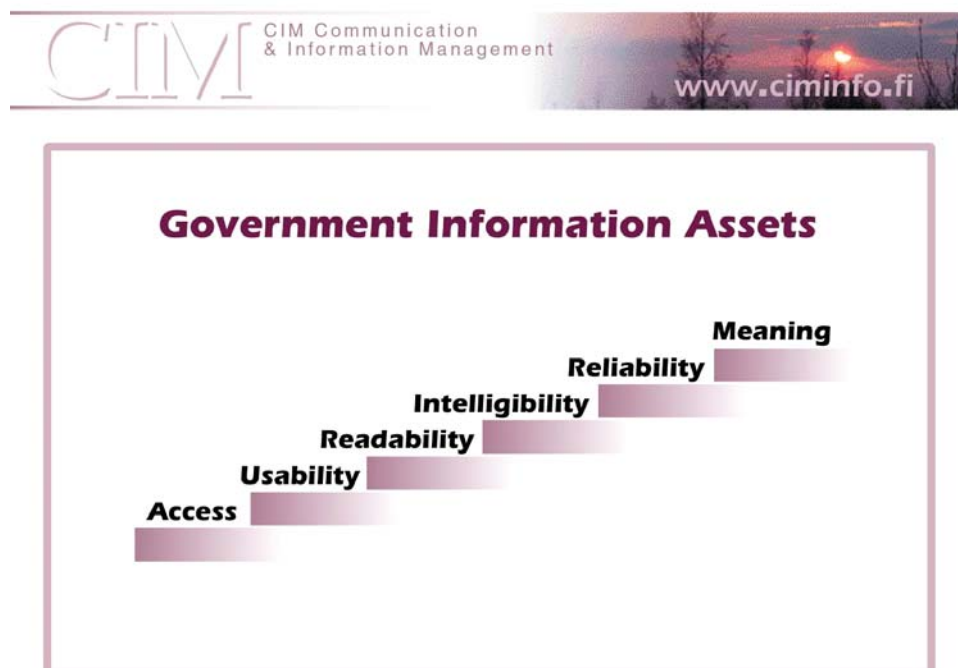
Information held by the government can be used for the inclusion or exclusion of citizens[8]. Government can, by disseminating information, prevent exclusion. A person able to access information should be neither dependent on personal networks nor at the mercy of the authorities. High quality and easily used net services increase the possibilities for citizens to operate independently and manage their lives provided they have access to technical equipment and sufficient skills for their use. A government based on democratic principles shares "empowering information" with the citizens via up-to-date, accessible and usable internet services and publications. This "empowering information" is also needed by the millions of emigrants, ex-patriots and immigrants who have no access to supporting

networks within their new environment. Finnish government offers on the Internet one portal, where citizens find information relevant to everyday life concerning public sector services[9].

The citizens may never before have had so much information available to them relating to the activities of the government. However, for the realization of democracy it is not sufficient that information is in principle available. It must be possible to obtain, to find, to use, to read, to understand and to disseminate this information. It should also be reliable and relevant from the point of view of the user. The government is responsible for the quality of the information it produces.

In Finland, the majority of the citizens have access to information produced by the government via either their own computer or by using one at their workplace, at school or in the library. Due to the Act on the Openness of Government Activities information is widely available, but not necessarily retrievable nor usable due to the shortages on the content and navigation structures, user interfaces on the internet services, non-existent metadata or because the services are not tested sufficiently at early stages by end-users. Further on the internet services information may be accessible, usable and retrievable, but if the end-user cannot read it or understand it, it is not of much use. Often the problem is in the organizational style of presentation and the bureaucratic jargon within. In Finland the governmental net services have drafted a quality criterion which pays attention to these matters[10].

The conditions and character of democracy require that the language used is understood by the citizens. Jargon is an instrument for the misuse of power and for the covering up of issues. In a democratic society the use of language used by the citizens, by the officials and by the decision-makers should not differ much. However, the government has to be continuously working to ensure that the language used for the transmission of information is not causing any obstacles in the understanding of public issues.

Offers of information on the net are often based on the perspective from the point of view of the producer or institution, not the customer. This is shown also in the groupings of the materials based on the form of the information (articles, books, databases), not on the content. The Finnish university libraries are currently engaged in a comprehensive project to display materials as an information map[11] . This project will assist in finding new kinds of information organisation methods.

 A lot of material and data systems originally constructed for use by experts have been opened up on the internet. Some of the problems could be easily rectified by tests for usability and the perspectives of the end-users. Alteration of the perspective and an offering of user-oriented perspectives require, however, changes in attitudes and is also laborious as large amounts of information resources have to be reorganised and redefined. No organization has the luxury to concentrate only upon itself when organising its information. Business processes usually concern several organizations and resources are more or less shared by those organizations[12]. Therefore, for example, the standardization of meta information is necessary.

Information Literacy needed by government officials

Information literacy needed by government officials consists of

- standard information literacy targets
- critical literacy skills as regards various media and the information forms and information backgrounds
- skills to produce and share information within the net environment, such as the skill to write short, easily understandable text and to parse it in a manner that makes reading easier on the net
- the skill to provide meta information: the skill to equip documents and publications with headings, key words and summaries so that the information can later on be found and combined with various information materials.

Information services are in a key position so that their task as literacy experts is to awaken awareness about the requirements of information literacy skills in public organizations and to actively assess and promote the versatility of information sources and their use.
For information services to provide this, they have to familiarize themselves with how information is used in governmental processes and to take a stand as regards the information contents.

How Libraries and information services can help: the role of information professionals

Comprehensive, collaborative information literacy will inevitably lead to new kinds of roles and tasks for information professionals in governments.

Advanced and comprehensive literacy requires a new kind of way to organize knowledge and knowledge space both in the physical and virtual world. This assumes a new kind of architecture moving the design of the information systems and net services to a new stage. It is not sufficient that information is accessible in some kind of storage form.

Information has to be acutely present within "visual reach" and it has to be in a usable, shareable form. Developing the meta level of information assets, the information production process and the methods, skills and awareness of the government officials, are extremely important.

In my view the roles of an instructor, educator and planner will be extending within the work of information professional. The tasks in government are likely to be in the following fields:

- transfer of knowledge, associated with information search, retrieval, acquisition and monitoring and the description of the content i.e. "meta writing" to officials based on versatile cooperation, support and training,
- planning of user-friendly net services supporting the information acquisition of end-users and particularly their information architecture and structures based on interdisciplinary cooperation, for example with information technology and communication professionals,
- development of the information content management methods and organisation of the meta information systems and practices.

It is very important that the information professionals will thoroughly understand their own operational environment and the strategies of their organisations. The goal-directed development on collaborative literacy requires visionary and strategic leadership. Collaborative Literacy means the active building of networks and sharing knowledge on many levels by information professionals at local, national, regional and global levels. In Finland information professionals of ministries have a long tradition of cooperation and coordination. It is important to extend the cooperation with and among knowledge and communication. Development of collaborative literacy within the government for the purpose of promoting democracy is a joint, extensive learning process. Global cooperation by information professionals is a significant resource for this process. Are the information professionals ready for the challenges?

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[7] http://www.otakantaa.fi

[8] See Lash Scott (2002): Critique of Information. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

[9] http://www.suomi.fi
Information portals for citizens in other countries:
in Sweden http://www.sverigedirekt.se/,
Norway http://www.norge.no/,
Denmark, http://www.danmark.dk/,
Estonia http://www.eesti.ee/,
United Kingdom http://www.ukonline.gov.uk/Home/Homepage/fs/en,
USA http://www.firstgov.gov/
Canada http://www.canada.gc.ca/

[10] http://www.vm.fi/tiedostot/pdf/fi/35314.pdf
[11] http://www.lib.helsinki.fi/tietolinja/0203/tietokartta.html
[12] http://www.cs.jyu.fi/~airi/