



Public access to government information in Anglophone Africa and the English-speaking Caribbean: are we there yet?

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Abstract:

In the English-speaking Caribbean and Anglophone Africa, access to government information is a daunting task. Accurately labelled as grey literature, government publications contain information valuable for the holistic well-being of all citizens throughout their daily lives, as well as for research. Information and communication technologies (ICT) and bibliographic structures are often identified as panaceas to ensure access, but their applications may be ineffective in the African and Caribbean countries of English colonial heritage, where more deeply entrenched factors which bar effective public access to government information should be first addressed. These include social and cultural issues, such as the citizen's perception of the relevance of government information for daily survival, the information professional's perception of the value of government information which impacts if and how such information is made accessible, and the State's role as enabler and facilitator of the entire process. The author endeavours to look at these issues on both continents by examining our progress thus far.

Keywords: public, access, government, information, Africa, Caribbean, Anglophone, English

What is government information and why is important to Anglophone Africa and the English-speaking Caribbean?

Government information is an important resource for the nature of a country's society, the debates and decisions that impact on its social and economic policies, and the development of political priorities for the citizenry (MLA Advisory Panel, 2006). Through official

government publications, citizens are informed about the policies, laws, national development plans, services, and decisions taken by their government (Mooko & Aina, 1998). The intelligence is varied and diverse and its manifestation and availability affect the life of every citizen.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA 1) defines government publications as “a record in any form prepared by or for an official source, circulated beyond that source to limited groups or to individuals other than those advising or negotiating with it, or to the general public.” Williams (2005, p.9) identifies government publications, sometimes referred to as government documents, as resources that have been published by a government department, office, agency, committee or task force, at any level of government.

Government information is ideal for research purposes because these publications are considered primary documents, are authoritative, and, for the most part, are free of bias. Its format is quite diverse and can consist of a single sheet of paper, a brochure, poster, map, book, CD-ROM or DVD, a sheet of microfiche or reel of microfilm, a videotape, a magazine, or a web site (Williams, 2005). Publications produced by some International Governmental Organisations and International Non-Governmental Organizations can also fall within this definition, save for the variance of their funding source.

Why is government information important to the English-speaking countries of Africa and the Caribbean? Because these countries in particular are inheritors of the British parliamentary tradition of collecting and reporting information and commissioning studies on a myriad of topics. Membership of the British Commonwealth carries an implied responsibility for governments to provide all kinds of information to their citizens and legislators in order to promote the public good, and reciprocally, citizens of the British Commonwealth in Africa and in the Caribbean legitimize their governments to the extent that they accept their governments’ role as reliable information providers.

E-Governance and ICT – what do they mean for access?

The last decade of the twentieth century heralded a thrust towards e-governance and the proliferation of e-publications and e-services. Electronic governance is being encouraged as a development catalyst for most countries because of the projected benefits that can accrue from its implementation and the strong support the program receives from agencies such as the United Nations and the World Bank (Cloate, 2007). E-government seeks to improve the activities of public sector organisations using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The implementation of ICT in e-governance is intended to minimise government bureaucracy, enhance efficiency and transparency, improve information sharing, and level the playing field by empowering the populace. In order to facilitate these objectives, the public should be educated about the availability of these services, have access to them, and understand the benefits of such access.

There are great parities and variances in the access and use of government information in the regions of the English-speaking Caribbean and Anglophone Africa. Traditionally, our right to access has been burdened by our immersion in a pyramidal structure of government and our need for “genuine decolonisation”, that is, the need for changes in attitudes and values of our use and utilisation of government products and information. This is not only apparent in the attitude of the recipient of the services but also in the attitude of their masters, who should serve.

Right to access?

The right to access government information can be seen as a “public right that must not be restricted by administrative barriers, geography, ability to pay, or format” (ALA, 2004). Too, as posited by an SACHR Commissioner, Leon Vassels, the right of access to information should not be approached in an adversarial manner but rather, it should be used as a “vehicle to change our society.” Since the work of government is published through taxes paid by its citizens, the related publications should almost never have copyright restrictions (Williams, 2005), as the application of copyright to government information would impede public access to that information (ALA, 2004). The information, whether in hard or soft-copy, should also be organised to facilitate easy retrieval and use.

The on-going use of web-sites by government ministries in both Anglophone Africa and the English-speaking Caribbean regions has transformed service delivery while at the same time it has introduced another set of challenges related to the access and use of government information by citizens – issues of connectivity, e-literacy, and digital preservation.

For the English-speaking Caribbean and Anglophone Africa, the natural right of citizens to access certain levels of government information must now be embedded in a country’s laws. Legislative support to facilitate the access to government information however, is still very much a work in progress. To date, only four countries in the Caribbean have enacted such Acts: Antigua & Barbuda, Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica, and Belize. Of the ten countries in Anglophone Africa, only three – South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe – have access-to-information laws, although Zimbabwe’s Access to Information and Privacy Act has been reputed to be used to suppress information in the name of privacy rather than make information available. As a result of this Zimbabwe’s AIPA is sometimes not included in counts of Right To Information (RTI) laws. Cf. <http://right2info.org/access-to-information-laws> (Accessed 6/6/2011). As at February 2010, Tanzania, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Zambia had bills tabled or soon to be tabled.

Challenges to access for citizens in developing countries

Although government information is widely recognised as a catalyst for both national and personal development (IFLA, 2002), many people, especially in the developing world, are still unaware of the need for information and so fail to exploit it even when information materials are available for free, as in libraries and other information centres. Apart from incognisance, this is partially because the availability of information does not necessarily mean its accessibility (Aguolu, 1997).

As people strive to come to terms with a changing environment, in the hopes of being better fed and housed, healthy and secure, there is a sizeable amount of public information to assist in this regard, but the information is not well packaged to meet the needs of semi-literate and non-literate people (Alemna, 2001).

Accessing government and other public documents published in developing Anglophone countries of the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa is also often problematic (Aguolu, 1997; Aina, 2000; Mooko & Aina, 1998). One reason for the poor visibility of these publications is the fact that lack of proper bibliographical control regulates these materials to the category of

“grey literature”. The term “grey literature” in the information world encompasses a miscellany of non-formally published documents and non-conventional literature that are difficult to identify or trace through normal bookselling channels (Fisher, 1995).

Other obstacles compound the difficulty in accessing government publications in developing countries. Some of these include the high illiteracy rate of citizens, lack of awareness of the need for information, geographical distance, poverty, and underdevelopment (Doob, 1961; Schramm, 1964). Aguolu adds that the lack of funds to acquire the relevant document also serves as a barrier to acquiring and providing adequate access to government material (1997).

The introduction of e-government and e-publications poses opportunities as well as challenges, as the articulation of service delivery principles, while well done, must still contend with the problems of poverty, inequality, corruption, insecurity, illiteracy, and skills shortage (Mutula & Mostert, 2008). The issues of connectivity and affordability of internet services to enable the smooth delivery of e-publications and services is also paramount for the success of citizens accessing government services in this new format. Meyer’s study of South African users’ use of internet at both the provincial and local level concluded that disappointment at the level of success to seek services discouraged their continued use of the facility for service delivery (2007). Similarly, an ECLAC study of Trinidad and Tobago’s Information Society identified one of the lessons learned as poor oversight and insufficient consideration attributed to managing the human aspect of change, which resulted in poor perception and limited buy-in, this, despite sound technical implementation of ICT (ECLAC, 2006).

Legislation – aid or hindrance?

The implementation of the various Access Acts in the Caribbean has not served to enhance delivery or awareness of government information. Legislation has failed to keep “governments honest” as advocated by proponents of the Acts. In fact, it is more the presence of an active and vigilant media or special interest groups that have managed to expose wrong-doings by governments and mobilised citizens’ appeal for fairness. McNeil and Mumvuma (2006) indicated that the Access to Information and Privacy Act in Zimbabwe, for instance, has actually hindered rather than facilitated free access to information as the relationship between government and NGOs is marred by suspicion and mistrust.

Paradoxically, while permission is granted to access the material, the document is still not always accessible because it cannot be located. In this regard, Jamaica’s Minister Senator Whiteman (2005) contends that a government entity should improve its internal record management system to enable the entity to better manage its own internal affairs system.

Rodrigues et al. (2008) contend that mere enactment of access laws is insufficient. An open democracy will also require review, amendment, and harmonisation of all legislation, rules, and guidelines to ensure clear implementation and redress, an information “champion”, and an effective processing and monitoring system.

How can libraries assist?

The provision of access to government information is both a principle and a professional practice that calls for a responsive action from libraries and information workers throughout Anglophone Africa and the English-speaking Caribbean. The whole range of library tasks – from acquisition to cataloguing, information technology empowerment to referencing and networking -- is primarily about providing access to information (Omekwu, 2003). In today's society, it is understood that information is power for development (Yilmaz, 1998).

It should also be widely understood that democratic rights are important for a free and civilised society and that information and education are basic rights that are essential to enable the democratic process. A good democracy needs widespread access to reliable and valid information for its citizenry if it is to function effectively (Line, 1988). Libraries can assist in this process by providing to a country's citizenry an adequate access to government information.

Smart (2007) identified public libraries as the principal agency in the English-Speaking Caribbean to facilitate access to government information for low and middle-income citizens. Libraries, by their very ethos, are well-placed to deliver in this position. This is not a novel concept, as in the UK public libraries were instrumental in the preparation of citizens' usage of ICT for accessing e-government services. In light of this occurrence, the pedagogical role of 21st century librarians should be embraced by both stakeholders and information professionals themselves.

Can we get there? Yes we can!

- **Proper retrieval aids – classification and bibliographic control**

The non-standardisation of bibliographic data is a contributing factor to the unawareness of government material (Madison & Lane, 1996). This applies with especial force in Anglophone Africa and the English-speaking Caribbean.

In Nigeria, Elder (cited in Omekwu 132) attributes poor accessibility to the lack of awareness of the publications due to poor bibliographic controls, a factor Douglas (1984) also highlighted in her Caribbean study. This deficiency creates a difficulty in identifying the item thus making the acquisition and ultimately the access process impossible. Hurt (1997) concurs with this assessment, and like Elder, believes that there are two basic levels of accessibility. The first level, which is very general, questions whether the material or information actually exists, while the second level becomes operational only if the first level can be solved. The first level deals with availability while the second deals with selection for retrieval of the information. In the second segment, Hurt surmises, classification and subject analysis have significant roles to play.

In advocating for the implementation of proper bibliographic controls, Omekwu (13) contends that local publishing cannot be detached from what is going on internationally as publishing is an international phenomenon. He argues that a country's publications will continue to be elusive if basic bibliographic information as to their authorship, appropriate title, place of publication, publisher's date, and pagination are ambiguous. Ultimately these materials are relegated to the world of grey literature.

Wood (1984, pp. 278-280) highlights some distinguishing characteristics of government publications that contribute to the difficulty of their access, such as small print runs, variable standards of editing and production, poor publicity, unacceptable format, for example, microform, and poor availability in libraries. Small print runs and poor distribution of country reports and workshop results are also some of the drawbacks that affect publications from IGOs and INGOs thus impacting on the difference these reports can make to the lives of citizens.

Aina explains that within developing countries, basic features such as bibliographic structure need first to be put into place to enable access to information. The challenge to developing countries rests in their various stages of development, the resources available and the importance that is attributed to the library and information systems of the country (pp. 179-180). Shuler (2002) relates that bibliographic controls, although evident, also had to overcome the reluctance of libraries that considered government publications “expensive to acquire, frustrating to understand, very labour intensive to maintain, and difficult to explain how to use to the public.” This viewpoint has not changed much.

The advent of e-documents has in ways seen a [reluctant] shift in librarians’ responsibility as they must now become familiar with government websites and services offered, although the pedagogical element is omitted. In some Florida libraries, for example, staffers have been instructed not to assist with e-government forms because of liability concerns (Oder, 2008).

These circumstances can be frustrating, as Line comments on the paradoxical nature of developing countries that devote finances to advanced bibliographic networks when the document supply infrastructure is rudimentary. He argues that the production of national bibliographies, although a basic function, was of less importance and magnitude than national information and document supply. He questioned whether national libraries’ treatment of national bibliographies as useful retrieval tools actually helped the user to obtain the library material or whether they simply raised awareness of the existence of relevant material and increased a demand that could not be fulfilled (Line, 1988).

- **Collection development policies and depository programmes**

Developing and maintaining a government publication collection can be a perplexing task. Since government documents have limited means of acquisition and disposal as compared with standard library materials, extra effort would have to be made to find alternative methods of collections at a relatively low cost. A comprehensive collection development policy would help to maintain some structure as it relates to maintenance such as retention, weeding, and preservation (Corrigan, 2006).

Clemons and Sproles posit that depository exchange lists are beneficial tools that should be used more often in the collection development process (2006). Their study revealed that collection development of government materials in some libraries in the United States stood out as a low priority. Unfortunately, most libraries in developing countries function without a Collection Development Policy for even their regular collection; so adding government publications, which by nature have proven “expensive to acquire, frustrating to understand, very labour intensive to maintain, and difficult to explain how to use to the public” (Shuler, 2002) might not be a high priority acquisition. Additionally, the fiscal climate has encouraged cutbacks and not facilitated retention in order to fit collections within the

economies of scale. Where previously government publications were free some now contain price tags, in response to the new public sector reform movement. Additionally, the e-component has not improved matters as some publications are still ephemeral on web-sites.

Legal deposits have assisted somewhat in the acquisition of these documents but this procedure is not always consistently maintained and would need to be strengthened (Douglas, 1984). In light of the prevalence of e-information, what is now needed is legislation to encompass online publications, as this deficiency means that collecting and preserving online government publication remains piecemeal and inefficient (Cunningham & Phillips, p. 317).

Arrangement of government publications in libraries

Another factor alleged to have contributed to under-utilisation is the lower visibility of such material when compared with commercially produced information, and the perceived inaccessibility of government publication, even once it is recognised as potentially useful (Schmidt, 2002). Hernon's study is instructive here as it concluded that researchers perceived that government did not publish any information that was relevant to their field of study or research interests, and so this contributed to the under-utilisation of government publications in the social sciences (1979, p. 371).

Conversely, an interview with a doctoral health science candidate highlighted her frustration with accessing government information as success depended on freeing up time to meander through the maze of government bureaucracy, relying on favourable interpersonal relationships with civil servants, their recall of meetings or projects, and personal fortitude, to retrieve information stored in poorly labelled vertical cabinets and files (Pansy Hamilton, personal communication, February 2, 2011). This would appear to confirm reports by Postema and Weech (1991) and Caswell (1997) that for some researchers, the time involved in trying to retrieve government documents for research outweighed the value of the information it contained. This cannot be our approach in developing countries such as the English-speaking nations of the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa, as the uniqueness of our socio-economic and cultural systems dictates that the solutions for improvements of our systems must rise from an in-depth cognisance of our systems and us as a people, and so research must be facilitated.

Dilevko (2000) notes that library staff should recognise that neither the physical layout of the library nor the arrangement of books and reports is necessarily understood by patrons, who find it daunting to traverse the intricacies of classification schemes without at least some initial guidance (p.324). While special libraries may pay more attention to arranging this body of material to offset the lack of cataloguing, most libraries rely on printed indexes and in-house records. Other information houses may simply shelve these documents in pamphlet or vertical files. Augur (1989) concludes that the result is limited access to important information, as these items are invariably not included in the library's online public access catalogue (cited in Mason, 2005), and finding aids provided are sometimes not the most efficient.

- **Promotion and marketing and the creation of value**

Schramm (1964) and Doob (1964) highlight lack of awareness as one of the obstacles to information accessibility in developing countries. As the volume of information continues to

grow and the human population multiplies, it is predicted that the problems of information dissemination and accessibility will increase (Aguolu, 2006). There is then the real danger of the marginalisation of certain groups in the society that could result in social exclusion.

Essential information services, and the people who deliver them, continue to face difficult times (DiMattia, 2005). Like all other public institutions, libraries depend on their legitimacy. If the service or the organisation is not perceived as valuable, up-to-date and legitimate in a broad sense, it cannot survive (Kann-Christensen & Pors, 2004). Rodger (2002) concurs, stating that doing the wrong thing well does not create value nor does “valuable” necessarily correspond with the library staff’s ideas of importance. The ultimate customers for government services whose satisfaction must be tended are taxpayers and their representatives who authorise appropriate support for them. Today’s library managers will have to know that today’s resource allocation is based on the value of the services the library provides and that value is determined by the effectiveness of the services in the lives of information customers (Singh, 2003).

- **E-Government and ICT**

One of the present and future major challenges for libraries is to deal with the consequences and opportunities of the digitisation of information (Hamilton & Pors, 2003). There is now a profusion of government information via government web-sites in the form of speeches, statistical information, service announcements and other such advices. The introduction of these new media has changed the profile of library collections (Kann-Christensen & Pors, 2004).

Cramer (2002) suggests that to keep track of government material, a library might add a government page to its web-site, add catalogue records for the materials or link directly to umbrella sites such as the government’s homepage. Additionally, since many state agencies are subject specific, the library’s subject specialist could monitor materials by checking agency publication pages and adding appropriate URLs to library subject pages. These efforts might be redundant however since search engines are extremely efficient in this regard, added to which most libraries under this review do not have functional or current web-sites.

The pedagogical opportunities linked with access to government information in Africa and the Caribbean should not be ignored. Adeyoyin (2006) in assessing the ICT literacy among the staff of West African University libraries, comparing Anglophone and Francophone African countries, concluded that in all the 28 university libraries surveyed, only the 40 Senegal university professional librarians had an ICT literacy level of 100 percent. The findings showed that only 179 out of about 370 professional librarians were ICT-literate, while the remaining 191 professional librarians were ICT-non-literate.

Conclusion

In many developing countries, the most prolific producer of domestic information is the government (Wesley-Tanaskovic, 1985). Having a wide and open access to detailed information concerning the activities, the decisions, and the actions of the government represents a feasible way of the public being and keeping informed on matters of national

importance. However, the ability of users to make effective use of information depends upon their general attitude towards information, that is, upon their awareness of the importance of that information for their various activities. It also depends upon their knowledge of the existence of relevant information sources and services, their familiarity with the techniques for accessing sources and, sometimes also, upon their linguistic and intellectual capabilities (Wesley-Tanaskovic).

While ICT is recognised as a great developmental tool with the potential for improving the lives of the population, a recent study concluded that thus far the region of Latin America and the Caribbean has lagged behind the rest of the developing world in benefiting from these technologies. Its poorest households cannot afford computers or Internet service. Ironically, these are often the persons who are more wont to access the services of their government.

Government records are a public asset and improper record-keeping compromises their integrity (Rodrigues, 2008). Without an effective system for creating, managing, storing and archiving records, implementation of an access law can be difficult. The law will also be undermined if information has been stored so badly that the records are not in a fit state to be inspected or copied. Unfortunately financial shortages, insufficient hardware and filing systems, poor bibliographic control and information delivery are all common ailments in Africa and the Caribbean (Rodrigues, 2008).

Libraries must play their part in facilitating democracy by committing to address some of these concerns. Fiscal challenges are always imminent but emotional decisions for management and training of human resources must also be revisited in the interest of the wider population.

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