

Towards a qualitative approach to evaluating Fol

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Presentation aims



- ✦ Highlight the policy issues
- ✦ Explain how research contributes to the issues
- ✦ Justify the methodology
- ✦ Identify policy recommendations

Background



Context of research

- ✦ ICT, social media and devolved distribution of information through non-government information agents (known as information converters) are becoming an integral part of Freedom of Information regimes, particularly as countries move to pro-active disclosure of government information.
- ✦ This research critiques the quantitative approach to evaluating performance of Freedom of Information regimes arguing traditional quantitative evaluation processes cannot capture insights into FOI culture.

Policy issues

Problematizing Fol policy evaluation

- ✦ FOI regimes operate across about 80 countries globally. Many countries are yet to introduce FOI, particularly across Africa and Asia. Various regimes operate globally.

Two key approaches to FOI:

- i. **pull model:** information is requested from government agencies;
 - ii. **push model:** information, the disclosure of which is not contrary to public interest, is released administratively as a matter of course.
- ✦ Current approaches to evaluating FOI across regimes rely on quantitative feedback from information administrators and information re-users.

✦ A gap exists in terms of how accessible information is to the

Research



Research Aim: We sought to identify how accessible government information is to the general public.

Approach

- ✦ Conducted an audit across push model FOI regimes in Australia to identify how people with no experience of FOI would be able to access information
- ✦ The audit started with a simple Google search (e.g. on “freedom of information” and the jurisdiction for example “Commonwealth”) in order to identify the key points of access for people wanting to discover how to access government information under Freedom of Information.

Research



Findings

- ✦ Tables in full paper reveal wide variations in the way FOI is treated. There is no common terminology, no common interface or layout, content varies. Commonalities include language predominantly English; audience is usually those processing/administering the requests (public authorities) and on requests for review of decisions. Websites change quickly.
- ✦ **Summary:** All three governments audited provided some level of FOI detail on the websites of the respective overview authorities, but this information is generally focused on those processing/administering the requests (public authorities) and on requests for review of decisions.

Research implications



- ✦ The audit revealed a “complex typology” of literacies entailing six dimensions: **legal, political, bureaucratic, civic, informational and citizenship** (see Breit 2011, Snell 2002, 188).
- ✦ All six dimensions, depicted in Figure one (see full article) are interrelated and are highly influential in shaping RTI culture, internally within the government agencies and externally amongst users and re-users.
- ✦ FOI accessibility is a literacy problem and capacity to effectively use it needs to be developed through a range of interventions.

Policy recommendations

- ✦ **Quantitative metrics cannot reveal the true picture about FOI's capacity to achieve its aims.**
- ✦ **ICT and social media provide opportunities for greater accessibility but educational interventions are required.**

Africa and Asia recommendations:

- ✦ **Understand information flow:** When freedom of information laws are introduced in African and Asian states, establish a FOI research unit to identify how people are using FOI.
 - I. Identify potentially vulnerable groups who might not possess the essential literacies to use FOI.
 - II. Design education programs, including use of technology, to empower citizen knowledge and use of FOI addressing the six dimensions of FOI literacy.

Policy recommendations



- ✦ **Expand approach to evaluation:** Develop a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches for gathering data on FoI efficacy. Conduct a series of case studies.
- ✦ **Utilise information networks:** Understand how FoI re-users, particularly the media, might promote greater public knowledge and skill in FOI use i.e. understand information flows and design FOI communication to maximise role of information converters particularly media.