



Request for information: good practices for establishing national normative frameworks that foster access to information held by public entities

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Intellectual freedom, freedom of expression and access to information – including public information – are key tenets of the professional ethical commitments of the global library field. Even before mechanisms of access to public information saw a large-scale shift to digital, libraries had a long history of archiving and collecting data from local government bodies in original paper form.¹ As such, the experiences of both individual libraries and national-level library institutions or networks can suggest some useful practices that can help ensure equitable access to public information.

Access to open and public sector information: supply-side good practices

Making information usable and discoverable. With the shift to digital in public sector information access mechanisms, there are of course crucial standards to help ensure transparency and equity - in particular, no financial, technical or legal restrictions to accessing public data and information. Wherever possible, government information and publications should be in the public domain.²

However, it is also important for efforts to promote digital access to public information – particularly national-level, government data platforms – not just to place this information online, but actively facilitate the accessibility and discoverability of data and information therein. The importance of ensuring easy access through such platforms is, for example, pointed out in some Open Government Partnership plans.³ Information and library science can offer helpful insights on data stewardship, archiving, and curating – a sentiment echoed, for example, in Ireland’s Department of Public Expenditure and Reform Open Data Strategy 2017-2022.⁴

We see this potential realised, among others, in city-level examples of cooperation between libraries and the public sector. In the United States, Chattanooga Public Library started hosting the city’s open data portal; helping making it as usable and accessible as possible. Similarly, a partnership between Boston and its public library had the goal of driving public engagement with available open data, resulting in a revamped data hub portal.⁵ The Chapel Hill Public Library also worked in partnership with the Town of Chapel Hill to launch an online open data platform featuring datasets from local government departments,⁶ prioritising easy access and engagement.

Ensuring long-term preservation of public information. This refers to both the issues of digitising analogue public sector records, and preserving and ensuring the authenticity of born-digital materials. Key considerations in this area are outlined in the 2012 UNESCO/UBC Vancouver Declaration.⁷

National and parliamentary libraries and national archives are often actively involved in digitising and/or ensuring long-term access to government and public information (e.g. in Australia⁸). They work with such questions as, for example, removing access restrictions and ensuring the accessibility and long-term availability of digitised public records.⁹ Law libraries and libraries with government information collections ensure access to legal information; and archival collections of many libraries preserve historic publications and information generated by public entities.

¹ <https://sites.temple.edu/librarynews/2018/01/31/future-proofing-civic-data/>

² <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/93558>

³ https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/publications/libraries_and_open_government_-_areas_for_engagement_and_lessons_learned.pdf

⁴ https://data.gov.ie/uploads/page_images/2018-03-07-114306.063816Final-Strategy-online-version1.pdf

⁵ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-11/how-libraries-can-make-public-data-more-accessible>

⁶ <http://odl.ischool.uw.edu/assets/ODL-LibraryRoleVideo-AudioTranscript.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/news/documents/vancouver-declaration-2012.pdf>. These issues are also highlighted in IFLA’s statement on government provision of public legal information in the digital age

⁸ <https://www.alia.org.au/about-alia/policies-standards-and-guidelines/principles-access-public-sector-information>

⁹ https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/publications/libraries_and_open_government_-_areas_for_engagement_and_lessons_learned.pdf

The experiences of national, as well as public and other libraries, in digitising public domain materials in their own holdings can also suggest good practices on how to support easier access and long-term preservation.

We therefore suggest that, among possible norms to foster nationwide access to information help by public entities, the questions of easy accessibility and discoverability of data portals and long-term preservation of public sector materials are considered. This can, in particular, be supported by ensuring that there are adequate policies in place for the collection and preservation of public information.

Access and participation infrastructure

Open Government Data platforms and other digital mechanisms of access to public information (e.g. information request portals) can help more people benefit from the availability of public data and information. However, digital inclusion remains a key factor in maximizing the impact of these initiatives. For instance, a 2017 TheGovernanceLab report focuses on open data in developing countries – especially data produced by governments – and points out how, among other system elements, digital divides can present a major barrier to meaningful impacts of open data initiatives.¹⁰

Here, many libraries' experiences with facilitating access to e-government offers a possible model for ensuring broader access for the public. UNDESA's E-Government Survey 2020, for example, points out that public internet access in venues such as libraries and educational institutions can help more people make use of e-government services by reducing connectivity costs for users.¹¹

This echoes the experiences of libraries in many countries, from Georgia to Australia to Singapore, in helping people access e-government services – particularly more vulnerable populations, e.g. homeless people, older citizens and people living in remote areas, and other groups.^{12 13} If coordinated on a national level, a mobilisation of existing library infrastructure to support digital inclusion can help ensure that more people benefit from online mechanisms to access public information online.

In addition, as a 2017 report by the UN Economic Commission for Africa points out, community organisations like libraries can play a two-fold role, both helping disseminate (whether through print or digital means) and collect relevant community-level data.¹⁴ This potential is realised, for example, in Colombia, where several public libraries and other host institutions took part in an open data collection project to help monitor air quality.¹⁵

Such practices suggest the importance of ensuring end-user access infrastructure for digital public information and data, including through public internet access facilities. In addition, it is helpful to consider a wider range of stakeholders who can help contribute to the generation and collection of public and open information and data - particularly community-driven initiatives; and information and data that helps meet local needs.

¹⁰ <https://odimpact.org/files/odimpact-developing-economies.pdf>

¹¹ [https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/Portals/egovkb/Documents/un/2020-Survey/2020%20UN%20E-Government%20Survey%20\(Full%20Report\).pdf](https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/Portals/egovkb/Documents/un/2020-Survey/2020%20UN%20E-Government%20Survey%20(Full%20Report).pdf)

¹² <https://www.ifla.org/node/92962>

¹³ <https://www.imda.gov.sg/news-and-events/Media-Room/Media-Releases/2020/Public-Libraries-Help-Seniors-Access-Digital-Resources-and-Public-Services-with-SDO-at-NLB>

¹⁴ https://www.uneca.org/archive/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/unlocking_the_potential_of_open_government-final.pdf

¹⁵ <https://makaia.org/en/portfolio/open-data-culture/>

Fostering a culture of active engagement with public sector and open data

Finally, a crucial element of an inclusive public information ecosystem is an effort to foster and support engagement with available data and information, including those generated by the public sector. This includes support for data literacy, raising awareness about the availability, relevance and possible uses for public sector information.

For example, Toronto Public Library hosted an open local data hackathon – an event bringing together citizens, data scientists and other experts to work with available city and library datasets to raise awareness and create project ideas to tackle poverty challenges in the city.¹⁶ The Hamburg State and University Library organised ‘culture hackathons’, challenging software developers, engineers and other specialists and enthusiasts to develop creative ways to use and interact with digital cultural collections.¹⁷

Raising awareness about the availability and value of open data and information is also a crucial step – for example, this was at the heart of Zimbabwe Library Association’s Open Data Day outreach initiative.¹⁸

Drawing on such experiences, we encourage normative frameworks fostering access to information held by public entities also to take into consideration measures to support demand. This can include fostering engagement with open public sector information and data by citizens, awareness-raising and skills-building opportunities for citizens to be able to navigate and use the information for their benefit.

¹⁶ <https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/topics/libraries-development/documents/local-government-human-rights-and-sustainable-development-ifla-response.pdf>

¹⁷ <http://library.ifla.org/1785/1/231-theise-en.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://blogs.ifla.org/faife/2020/03/06/libraries-and-open-data/>