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Information as a Public Resource: Leading Canadians into the Information Age

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Information Management as a Political Issue

Canadian governments are assembling an awesome new power to accumulate data and information through Internet technologies. Many officials worry about their ability to manage the new resource effectively. One result is that information management is now a rapidly growing area of expertise that attracts some of the brightest young minds in government.

For their part, many politicians, pundits and journalists shrug when they hear the latest government newspeak. Management—whether of information or programs—is the business of bureaucrats. Important, yes—but in the absence of wrongdoing or mismanagement, it is not likely to show up on their radar screens.

They are missing the issue. Information is the way of the future. It is to the knowledge economy what oil was to the industrial economy. It will be a key source of innovation, power, wealth, influence and prestige in the 21st century.

Bland terms such as "information management" are not helpful. They obscure the really hard questions around who will control it, how it will be used and for what purposes. In large part, this will depend on how it is sorted and made available. Will all Canadians have a chance to benefit from it?

As governments enter the Information Age, the real challenge—and opportunity—is not only to manage the coming deluge of information, but also to make it available to Canadians in a form that will help them increase their wealth, productivity and quality of life. That is a political issue.

The following sections compare two opposing strategies to treat information as a new public resource that, on one hand, ensure that all Canadians can benefit from the opportunities and, on the other, protect the integrity of our democratic institutions and processes.

Governments as Reservoirs of Information

It is widely agreed that the so-called New Economy is increasingly knowledge-based and that governments are huge reservoirs of data and information. But data is the basic building block of knowledge. It can be combined to yield information, which can then be used to produce knowledge—the basis of new products and services. Governments could use their new capacity to gather and sort information to help Canadians establish the competitive edge they need to prosper in the new economy. How is that to be done?

In the industrial economy, oil was a key resource. In the knowledge-based economy, information will assume a similar importance. Those with access to it will have the raw materials from which to create new products and services. This means that, if information is to provide a competitive edge, it must be accessible and abundant.

Governments are rich reserves of data, information and knowledge. At present, this resource is scattered across and throughout a wide range of departments and agencies. For example, Human Resources Development Canada, Statistics Canada, the National Research Council and Industry Canada contain vast amounts of information on everything from birth rates and social trends to metallurgy and international investment. Access to it is often limited, the information is fragmented or it may have been lost in some dark passageway.

At the same time, governments' use of new information and communications technology is growing exponentially. A powerful new information machine is emerging that will reach into and across government. It could be used to integrate and liberate much of the holdings. It could also allow governments to begin pumping out a limitless supply

of new information. This would help ensure an adequate supply to meet the needs of citizens, businesses and civil society in the future.

The argument suggests a simple, clear strategy for treating information as a public resource. First, governments should make their holdings available as quickly as possible, subject to appropriate restrictions around privacy and security. Second, it should be done in a manner that makes the information readily accessible—hence the importance of the new science of information management.

A Problem with the First Option

But there is a problem. A worrying danger of the Information Age is that we overload ourselves with information. It is easy to become confused when reputable but contrary pieces of information surface about a particular subject. The bureaucratic challenge here lies in how the information is sorted and presented. The political challenge lies in who gets to decide how it is done.

Consider the current debate over the Kyoto accord. On one hand, the Government of Alberta and many private sector organizations argue that ratifying Kyoto is a bad idea—it will harm economic growth. On the other hand, the Government of Canada and many environmental organizations maintain that Kyoto is a good idea—it will not impair growth. On the contrary, they claim that developing new technologies will lead to innovation and growth and that it is necessary to protect the environment.

Both sides have produced a battery of studies, statistics, expert opinions and research to support their claims. But the vast majority of Canadians have neither the time nor the expertise to sort through them. With more and more information available, making an informed decision on such matters threatens to become impossible. Would liberating governments' vast holdings only make the situation worse?

The argument puts two points in sharp relief. First, Canadians will need more that just an abundant source of accessible information to establish a competitive edge in the Information Age. The material must also be accurate and authoritative. Second, users must feel that they can trust the source that provides the information. More often than not, they will be unable to test the quality.

So the growing need for information will not be met by a focus on quantity alone. There is also a question of quality. Moreover, too much information without a high level of public confidence in the quality could undermine Canadians' ability to make informed decisions, ranging from personal investments to industrial research.

Perhaps more worrying, democracy itself could be harmed. It rests on the premise that citizens are able to engage in informed public debate and to make their choices on that basis. Democracy assumes the presence of reliable, accurate and authoritative sources of information. Information overload could threaten this.

So there is a dilemma: on one hand, there is a strong argument in favour of instructing governments to liberate their holdings as quickly as possible. On the other hand, there is also a strong argument that too much information can cause confusion, bad decision-making and, ultimately, paralysis. Do we need to choose between these competing concerns? Is there a way to balance them?

Second Option: A Charter of Public Information

According to some, government is well positioned to play more than the role of a supplier of information. It is also well positioned to act as an authoritative and trusted source of accurate information. It has the power to sort and present information, unfettered by commercial or other interests in a way that business and civil society organizations often do not.

About this Series
Policy, Politics & Governance

Over the last decade, governments in OECD countries have been experimenting with "new tools," ranging from Internet technologies to community partnerships. They could greatly improve government and democracy. But it is increasingly clear that these tools change how modern governments work, what they do and how they make decisions. Learning to use them well will require experimentation and careful analysis from the public service. It will require informed debate, strong leadership and good decision-making from politicians. This series is dedicated to exploring the issues from both points of view.

Centre for Collaborative Government

The Centre for Collaborative Government is a Canadian public interest research organization. Its mission is to promote more effective management of the interdependence between government departments, levels of government or government and the private or third sectors. The Centre advances public dialogue and research on public management and governance through a Canada-wide network of associates. The centre for Collaborative Government is a division of Kaufman, Thomas & Associates, Inc.

For example, search engine companies sell the order in which information will be presented. The practice is regarded as a form of advertising. But many users are unaware of this and search engine companies have been disinclined to inform them. Indeed, the US Federal Trade Commission recently had to recommend that the industry take steps to improve disclosure of paid content within search results.

For reasons such as this, supporters of a leadership role for government in providing trusted, accurate and authoritative information claim that the private sector and civil society alone cannot be relied on to do so. They are too often driven by commercial or other interests to provide information impartially. At the same time, the supporters of this view recognize that government's credibility is also questionable but they think this can be overcome. For example, Statistics Canada is already one of the most respected information providers in the world. How could government ensure that its information would be trusted?

One proposal is to create what can be called a Charter of Public Information. It would be produced by Parliament or a legislature after appropriate public consultation. Such a charter would have at least two components:

- A set of categories identifying the various types of information government would provide. These might include historical-cultural, scientific, or statistical forms of information.
- A statement of the values, principles and goals defining the nature of the government's commitment to provide authoritative, accurate information for the categories in the first section and to do so in a timely manner.

Once the charter had been proclaimed, the task of implementation would be handed over to the public service. Each category would be assigned to a lead department, which would then have the task of developing a framework of standards and policies for producing data, information and knowledge in the area.

Finally, a new Office of the Auditor General of Public Information would be created to oversee the on-going implementation of the charter and to ensure that departments complied with the frameworks.

Taken together, the combination of charter, framework and independent oversight would oblige government officials to produce and release quality information as quickly as possible, according to values, principles and goals decided by Parliament or the provincial legislatures. At the same time, the new regime would protect officials from political interference as they worked.

Challenging the Charter Option

The proposal meets with opposition from those who favour the first strategy of immediate and (relatively) unrestricted liberation of government information. They say that government should not interfere with the process by attempting to create yet another layer of bureaucracy around information.

In this view, governments are in no position to guess what kind of information citizens, business or NGOs will want or need in the future. Pretending that they can predict the uses of information in the Information Age is futile. It is the users who should decide. The metaphor of the market seems to guide their thinking here.

They argue that some of these organizations would compete to establish a niche in the information market by staking their reputation on the quality of their information. Likely candidates are universities, newspapers and think tanks. Allowing the information market to work, it is thought, will result in a more flexible and responsive alternative to government. All in all, they conclude, it would provide a better counterbalance to interest groups and advocates who circulate bad or misleading information.

A Final Reply from Charter Advocates

There is a rejoinder from advocates of the Charter strategy. They reply that treating information as a public resource is often about more than serving economic needs. Although the market model may work well for some information, there is a high risk of "market failure" in key areas, which could be harmful to Canadian society. For instance, imagine an eighth-grade student who has been asked to write a short essay on Louis Riel. The student goes onto the Canada website to use its search engine. She types "Louis Riel" and receives 1500 references on the topic.

We can be confident that she will not read them all. More likely, she will take the first two or three references that appear and use them as her primary source material. As a result, they will define her first—and perhaps lasting—impressions of a controversial figure in Canadian history. They will paint her picture of how Canadians understand themselves, their country and their history. This may well be

her only critical encounter with the debate over Louis Riel and the history that followed. How will government decide the order in which the references appear?

The point that charter advocates wish to make here is that the task of organizing information and making it accessible is about more than information management. It involves political choices that may be highly controversial and that may have a significant impact on Canadian culture and history. They believe that it is a responsibility of government to ensure that these choices are made in a way that is fair and that represents the diversity of opinion within Canada. It is critical to the values that underpin our society and should not be left to market forces.

Conclusion

We are entering a new age. Government's role is changing and officials are under pressure to adjust. In particular, they must retool government so that it can meet its emerging responsibilities as a primary source of data, information and knowledge for Canadians. How that goal is to be realized is less clear. Experts have conflicting views on what will serve citizens best. What is clear is that the issues are not just technical ones about the most efficient way to organize and present information. They involve choices over fundamental values that define who Canadians are and how they practice democracy. Politicians should be leading such a debate, not public servants. They should be consulting with experts and the public to determine the best option for Canadians.

About the Authors

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