



# Stewardship and usefulness: Policy principles for information-based transparency

Sharon S. Dawes

Center for Technology in Government, University at Albany, Albany, NY, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

Available online 6 August 2010

### Keywords:

Transparency  
Information policy  
Information stewardship  
Information usefulness  
Information utility

## ABSTRACT

This paper is a conceptual and empirical exploration of the tensions inherent in the drive to increase openness and transparency in government by means of information access and dissemination. The idea that democratic governments should be open, accessible, and transparent to the governed is receiving renewed emphasis through the combination of government reform efforts and the emergence of advanced technology tools for information access. Although these initiatives are young, they already exhibit daunting complexity, with significant management, technology, and policy challenges. A variety of traditional and emerging information policy frameworks offer guidance, while diverse research perspectives highlight both challenges to and opportunities for promoting information-based transparency. Early experience with Data.gov, a central component of the U.S. Open Government Initiative, suggests that two fundamental information policy principles, stewardship and usefulness, can help guide and evaluate efforts to achieve information-based transparency.

© 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Public policies pertaining to information flow are among the most fundamental aspects of democracy. These policies reflect societal choices about how information should be produced, processed, stored, exchanged, and regulated (Benkler, 1998). In the United States, for example, the First Amendment to the Constitution embodies democratic principles of free expression, an independent press, and free exchange of information among citizens. It reflects strong values attached to the desirability of diversity in information sources and content as well as universal access to and participation in the marketplace of ideas. By applying these principles, government treats information as an *object* of policy, that is, information itself is the subject of policy making. These policies tend to provide broad general guidance and to treat government as the regulator of societal information flow. In addition to First Amendment rights of free expression, examples of these kinds of policies are found in laws banning censorship, protecting personal privacy, and providing patent and copyright protections for intellectual property.

However, in addition to its regulatory role, government is also an information collector, producer, provider, and user. In this role, government treats information as an *instrument* of policy. In doing so, it makes decisions about whether and how to collect, develop, disseminate, analyze, and preserve information in the service of some other policy principle (such as transparency, accountability, or social equity), or to achieve specific goals in domains such as public health, environmental quality, or economic development. These instrumental

information policies tend to be specific and prescriptive. They are generally carried out in one of three ways: by collecting data for the express purpose of publication, by requiring private entities to publish certain kinds of information, or by releasing to the public information collected in the course of government program operations and regulatory activities.

The first method is exemplified by the work of the U.S. Census Bureau, Statistics Canada, and similar organizations in nearly every country that collect standardized data and publish statistical series and special reports that are authoritative sources of public information about populations and economies. A policy of the New York City Health Department illustrates the second method of policy implementation. The department requires chain restaurants to post the calorie content of each menu item in the hope that consumers will take that information into account in making healthier meal choices. The department does not collect or report the calorie data itself, but instead requires restaurants to gather and provide it directly to customers. In the third method, information collected or produced by government for operational or program management purposes is released to the public for some additional or secondary purpose. For example, public school “report cards” use student test data and budget information to highlight the performance of schools for parents and community members to consider as they formulate educational policies, programs, and budgets.

This paper is a conceptual and empirical exploration of the tensions inherent in the drive to increase openness and transparency in government by means of information access and dissemination. Karr (2008) summarizes three enduring tensions associated with public use of government information. The first tension is between comprehensiveness of the data and its understandability by non-

E-mail address: [sdawes@ctg.albany.edu](mailto:sdawes@ctg.albany.edu).

technically oriented citizens. The second tension is between the desires to ensure usefulness of detailed data and to simultaneously protect the confidentiality of data subjects. The third is the public need and desire to analyze and understand “global” data sets versus the reality that government data is not maintained as a global asset but rather is distributed across scores of organizations and policy domains, at all levels of government.

Tension also exists regarding the release of government information that may be subject to misinterpretation due to lack of descriptive metadata, or the need for expert frames of reference or specific analytical skills (Dawes, Pardo, & Cresswell, 2004). These problems often surface when information is used for purposes other than the purpose for which it was collected. Such information was generally not collected with public release in mind. It is seldom managed in the structured way that census data or other standard statistics are managed, making it more difficult for others to use and interpret and more subject to misunderstanding and misuse. In addition, some information is considered too sensitive or dangerous to release to the public (such as details of nuclear power plants, military installations, or power grids), especially in view of escalating global security threats.

An additional set of issues is associated with information that is meant to be published but that does not validly or accurately measure the things it purports to represent. Performance reports such as “report cards” and “benchmarks” are criticized for this weakness because they reduce complex phenomena to simple numbers or letter grades that ignore scale, scope, and context, and can mask data quality problems (Bannister, 2007).

Despite these challenges, access to government information is receiving renewed emphasis all over the world. This emphasis reflects two trends: 1) a drive for government reform that stresses openness and transparency, and 2) increasing availability and continuing development of information technologies that allow institutions, organizations, and individuals alike to find, share, combine, and reuse government information content.

This study begins with a summary of recent U.S. initiatives to implement transparency principles followed by a discussion of multiple perspectives associated with this movement as reflected in both policy documents and research literature. That discussion concludes by presenting two overarching policy principles – information stewardship and information usefulness – that can be used to sort and balance these perspectives and tensions. The paper then applies these principles to Data.gov, a central component of the Obama Administration’s Open Government Initiative, to illustrate how they might be used to help achieve and assess the effectiveness of these initiatives. The paper concludes with a future research agenda that builds on this exploratory investigation.

## 2. Recent U.S. initiatives to achieve information-based transparency

Technology-supported, information-intensive initiatives to inform the public emerged with the initiation and growth of e-government in the 1990s. *Fedstats.gov*, is one early example in which the federal “statistical agencies” joined together to improve their data products and provide ancillary information and tools for the public. It provides access to thousands of data sources and reports on 400 topics provided by more than 100 organizations, including units of the Departments of Commerce, Labor, Justice, and Agriculture. Other early work focused on the collection and digitization of land records and associated geospatial data organized in state- and national-level data repositories such as the National Spatial Data Infrastructure (Federal Geographic Data Committee). These resources provide standardized spatial data useful to planners, police, emergency services, assessors, school officials, real estate professionals, and others.

Information-intensive processes have also contributed to transparency. In the early 2000s, *Regulations.gov* started as part of an

extensive electronic rulemaking initiative intended to provide citizens, businesses, advocacy groups, researchers, and lawyers with electronic information and tools to find proposed regulations, submit comments, do independent analysis, and track the progress of rule development. Extensive back office changes in the rulemaking process, still in progress, are an essential part of this effort.

In 2006, *USAspending.gov*, provided a single, searchable website that attempts to answer a fundamental public accountability question—where do federal dollars go? The site is frequently updated and summarizes federal spending in major categories. It also provides an IT dashboard for major technology projects, identifies the top government contractors and assistance recipients, and links to procurement information and related resources.

In 2009, the Obama Administration combined and augmented these approaches with additional information-based efforts to make government more transparent. Spending associated with the \$787 billion American Reinvestment and Recovery Act has been made available through *Recovery.gov*, which is designed to collect and display to the public frequently updated data about spending and performance across a variety of program areas and levels of government, including the private sector.

The 2009 Open Government Directive (OGD) (Office of Management & Budget, 2009) requires federal agencies to post previously internal electronic datasets for public use on a new government-wide website, *Data.gov*. The website states

As one of the flagships of the Open Government Initiative, Data.gov is designed to facilitate access to Federal datasets that increase public understanding of Federal agencies and their operations, advance the missions of Federal agencies, create economic opportunity, and increase transparency, accountability, and responsiveness across the Federal Government—i.e., ‘high value’ datasets.

Data.gov contains several catalogs of downloadable data sets, examples of data use, and an online dialog that invites public comment on ways to improve the site and the data it contains.

In addition to these executive branch activities, in March 2010, the bi-partisan Congressional Transparency Caucus (2010) adopted a set of principles to guide the development of legislation to formalize transparency goals in federal law.

Although these initiatives are very young, they already exhibit daunting complexity, with significant information management, technology and policy challenges. All of the web-based information resources described above have been lauded as innovations, but they have also been criticized as incomplete, inaccurate, difficult to use, hard to understand, out of date, or expensive to operate, coordinate, and maintain.

## 3. Legal and policy frameworks for transparency

While the initiatives outlined above are recent ones, public access to government information as a foundation for democracy has a long and relevant legal and policy history.

### 3.1. Traditional frameworks

Information policy principles that address government transparency have been embodied in American law since the eighteenth century. As early as 1789, Congress enacted laws regarding the orderly recording of government activities. But, as the nation grew more complex, the simple approaches of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became less effective means of public information. Accordingly, other laws both strengthened the record keeping responsibilities of public agencies and facilitated citizens’ knowledge of and access to them.

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات