

Essay

Core Competencies of Public Information Officers in the 21st Century: Retooling for Open Government

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Public Information Officers (PIOs) are at the forefront of communicating news and information about key government programs and projects and, inevitably, key government officials. Thus, PIOs play a crucial role in promoting and pursuing transparent, accountable, and citizen-oriented governance, which are consistent with open government data (OGD) principles.

Given a society's prevailing traditional values, mindsets, and customs in the working environment or governance culture, PIOs are practically running the gauntlet of daunting challenges in their advocacy and practice of an open government. These effectively pose hindrances to PIOs' becoming "apostles" of an open government.

Some experts refer to public information as "government information" or "public administrative communication," among others. According to Garnett (1997a, as cited in Garnett, 2011), public administrative communication may include administrative agency reporting, interagency or intergovernmental interaction, and efforts to gauge agency stakeholder opinions. While the core of PIOs can be found in the Ministry of Information (Mol) of most governments worldwide, there are also PIOs in other government ministries (departments) assigned to do public information work for their particular agencies.

PIOs commonly serve as agency spokespersons, moderators during press conferences or briefings, and press release writers and distributors. PIOs are regarded as the government counterparts of public relations (PR) practitioners or corporate communicators in the business world. In some unfortunate cases, they are even labeled as government propagandists.

Public Communication in the 21st Century

The emergence of the “knowledge society” is redefining the philosophy and principles of public information in the 21st century. Communication models, strategies, and approaches are being reengineered to suit the new communication setting. Simply put, old public information strategies no longer work. If public information offices today continue to create programs and projects, which are identical to those implemented a decade or even five years ago, these offices will likely fail in their purpose(s).

Today’s knowledge society is driven by several factors with significant impact on public information work. Three of these factors are as follows: 1) the advent of information and communication technology (ICT); 2) the emergence of a critical and engaged public; and (3) the movement towards open government.

To what extent have public information offices realigned their structures, programs, and strategies to meet the challenges brought about by these factors?

The concept of open government has an enduring impact on public information work in governments worldwide as it sets new political and ethical standards. The Open Government Partnership (OGP) was introduced in 2011 to provide “platform for domestic reformers committed to making their governments more open, accountable, and responsive to citizens.” From the original eight countries (the Philippines included), the OGP now has 69 participating countries (Open Government Partnership, n.d.).

Joshua Tauberer (2014) identifies 14 Principles of Open Government Data (see Table 1). Filipino ICT expert Emmanuel C. Lallana (2014) notes that OGD principles are akin to competencies.

Table 1. Tauberer's Open Government Data Principles

Online and Free, Primary, Timely, and Accessible (Principles 1 to 4)
Analyzable Data in Open Formats (Principles 5 and 7)
No Discrimination and License-Free (Principles 6 and 8)
Publishing Data with Permanence, Trust and Provenance (Principles 9 to 11)
Public Input, Public Review and Coordination (Principles 12 to 14)

Some of these principles are discussed in more detail below.

Rewiring Public Information Offices

As we all know, ICT has changed the communication process—from a one-way, top-down approach to an interactive, multi-directional process. The diffusionist model, best encapsulated in the so-called “information dissemination” campaigns by many government information agencies, represents the traditional mindset of PIOs that needs rethinking and change.

ICT has also multiplied the channels and tools for communication. The new tools and channels do not conform to the diffusionist model, but, rather, facilitate interactive and participatory communication processes.

We no longer have the classical “passive audiences” of government news and information; rather, we have engaged individuals who can even produce and share their own content. ICT has also changed content development. Young people, usually comprising more than half of several countries’ populations, have been producing their own media content through their use of social media and mobile technology.

Today’s PIOs “communicate” information; they do not merely “disseminate” information. Their avowed purpose is to go beyond informing and educating the public. More importantly, they aim to empower the people to access, analyze, process and organize information, and thus, repackage them into knowledge products that

address information needs and requirements. From a “disseminator” of information, the new PIO takes on new roles—as an “enabler” and “facilitator” of positive development. Meanwhile, people engagement and empowerment require media and information literacy (MIL) skills.

Hence, we can raise questions here as follows: How many government information offices have turned to social media and mobile technology as mechanisms for communication and people engagement? Have they also set up a unit dedicated to new media?

Critical and Engaged Public

Given the emergence of a critical and engaged public, PIOs must also be innovative, creative, and equally engaged. Three recent manifestations of an engaged public are the interrelated concepts of citizen journalism, user-generated content, and crowdsourcing.

Addressing the Needs of the Critical and Engaged Public

It remains difficult, if not impossible, to have a critical and engaged public, if they do not have free access to accurate and updated government data and information. Data and information, (once) shared, enable the public to make informed choices and decisions and to meaningfully participate in the discussion of governance issues.

PIOs are called upon to work with chief information officers (CIOs), or specialists in charge of ICT and management information systems, in order to make information available to the public in various open formats and platforms, including the use of an open data portal. These requirements are consistent with the Open Government Data Principles by Tauberer (2014).

Another responsibility for PIOs is to help “popularize” government data and information so that these can become user-friendly to different audiences. Indeed, data or information visualization has become one of the core competencies of a PIO in the 21st century.

Supporting Citizen Journalism, User-Generated Content and Crowdsourcing

Citizen journalism makes individuals less dependent on public information offices for government news and information as the citizens themselves are able to report on accomplishments and, even, on current or emerging issues and concerns. Citizen journalism exacts accountability on government offices.

By providing citizens with adequate data and information (and with the availability of user-friendly media technologies), the recipient community members have become capable (“capacitated”) of creating and sharing user-generated content. Therefore, another challenge for PIOs is to engage in crowdsourcing, which involves mapping and harvesting (and eventually sharing) relevant content produced by the community.

PIOs no longer have the monopoly in producing public information; they should recognize the public’s right to content development, and acknowledge the public’s capability to complement or even enhance content from public offices.

Crowdsourcing also provides the public an opportunity to express their views and opinions, or give feedback, on the quality of government programs and the performance of government authorities.

Core Competencies of Public Information Officers in an Open Government Setting

Today’s knowledge society has redefined the roles of PIOs. New roles demand new competencies, which will enable them to function effectively in an open government setting.

Competencies refer to knowledge, complex skills, behaviors and attitudes that enable an individual to perform a specific task or role. Table 2 summarizes the proposed new competencies for the

21st century PIO. The table also integrates open government data principles.

Let us examine some of the variables in this competency matrix.

Table 2 Comparative Competencies for Public Information Officers: Moving from the 20th Century to the 21st Century

20th Century PIO Competency	21st Century PIO Competency
Output-oriented	Output-and outcome-oriented
Customer-blind (general public)	Audience- or participant-specific
Source-oriented	Audience- or participant-driven (needs-and demands-based)
Able to work in a centralized and controlled information environment	Able to work in an open government culture (with focus on transparency, accountability and citizen engagement)
Able to disseminate information to a passive audience	Able to communicate/exchange information with critical, engaged and interactive “participants” (information producers and consumers)
Able to disseminate government-driven data/information	Able to share free, primary, timely, accessible, analyzable data/information (in open formats)
Able to engage in top-down and one-way communication	Able to engage in multidirectional communication
Expert-dependent in crafting strategies and messages (relies on subject specialization)	Collaborative in crafting strategies and messages (explores multidisciplinary (e.g., social sciences) perspectives)
Able to use traditional mass media	Able to use multimedia channels
Able to work within a print culture	Able to work within the visual culture

Able to use creative strategies	Able to use evidence-based creative planning and management (data/media analytics as new core skills)
Has news writing as core competency	Has newswriting, news aggregation, and news curation as core competencies

The culture of open government demands reengineering public information principles and work processes as well as developing appropriate competencies and mindsets, as there is still resistance to easy access to public information in many governments.

Such a resistance is present in authoritarian regimes, which usually detest open access to information (open government), as this would empower citizens, who can become threats to the ruling administration. Open access is also difficult in highly centralized systems, wherein decisions on which information can be made accessible are decided upon by the few top officials.

Meanwhile, the tedious bureaucratic system renders the information dissemination (exchange) process circuitous and time-consuming, making government data or information outdated, by the time these are retrieved and shared.

PIOs are expected to champion access to information in their respective agencies. They are also expected to be proactive (rather than reactive) in releasing government data in open formats and through open data portals. Public information should aim for transparency and participation in governance. The PIOs should become open data champions.

Open Government/Open Government Data (OG/OGD) Principles 1 to 4 call for online and free, primary, timely, and accessible data and information. The OG principles advocate for full disclosure policy, which mandates national and local government offices to be transparent in their operations, especially in terms of budget and financial transactions.

PIOs can take the lead in making relevant official documents available and accessible via official websites and portals. In the Philippines, since the launch in January 2014 of the Open Data Portal (data.gov.ph), it now holds over 2000 data sets in addition to 13 dashboards and 87 data visualizations.

A declaration was adopted in June 2016 by participants of the first Information for All Programme (IFAP) international conference on Media and Information Literacy (MIL) for Building a Culture of Open Government in Khanty-Mansiysk, Russian Federation. It recognized MIL's essential role in open governance and called for the development of MIL standards and assessment systems for MIL as well as capacity building for and investment in enabling ecosystems.

Open government is also supported in the Finlandia Declaration, titled, "Access to Information and Fundamental Freedoms—This is Your Right!" Adopted during the World Press Freedom Day celebration on 03 May 2016, it reiterates that the right to information is an integral component of freedom of expression, and is fundamental to democracy and to other rights and freedoms.

The Declaration also notes that Sustainable Development Goal 16 includes points relevant to press freedom, access to information, safety of journalists, and the rule of law. Specifically, Target 16.10 states the aim to "ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms in accordance with national legislation and international agreement."

Among others, the Declaration calls upon each UNESCO member state

to put in place strong systems for proactive disclosure of information, taking full advantage of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and promoting, as far as possible, universal access to the Internet, and respect for open data principles and to direct the necessary attention and political will to ensuring full implementation of the right to information, including addressing the culture of secrecy within government institutions.

PIOs must therefore facilitate community participation in community development planning and budgeting to ensure that local plans are community-centered or driven. The PIOs' role is not limited to sharing data/information for decision making; they are also responsible for providing the channels or platforms for feedback and dialogue.

The existence of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Law is not an assurance that it is recognized in practice. Hence, PIOs should commit to open access to public information.

The exemptions should be consistent with international standards. Among the permissible exemptions are privacy; national security, public health and safety as well as prevention, investigation, and prosecution of legal wrongs.

The traditional (20th century) public information office, on one hand, operates in a setup where the organizational structure defines its institutional programs and projects with predetermined strategies and results. The modern (21st century) public information office, on the other hand, begins by envisioning concrete outcomes and outputs before developing the strategies necessary to achieve the outcomes and outputs.

Examples of outcomes are a community that is critically aware and knowledgeable about current and emerging development issues and a community that is actively engaged in addressing such development issues. These two outcomes are a result of open government/open government data.

Many public information and communication programs fail because of their "one-size-fits-all" approach, where "audiences" are broadly defined and perceived as "passive," and where objectives, strategies, and messages are not audience- or participant-specific. Message "dissemination" often follows the "shotgun" approach, which targets as many individuals as possible who are within the range, but with minimum or no effect, or effects that are difficult or impossible to measure.

The absence of well-defined audiences is described by Osborne and Gaebler (1992) as “customer-blindness.” For Garnett (2011), communication (that is) aimed at the general public makes little sense, as neglecting to specify and study one’s intended audiences is tantamount to delivering a program without first conducting a needs assessment to discover whether or not there exist needs for such a program.

In addition, open government and open government data become more meaningful if the information needs of marginalized sectors are prioritized. In many cases, marginalized individuals and groups are unable to articulate their information needs and access digital data and information because of digital illiteracy and lack of access to technology.

PIOs should, therefore, prioritize reaching the marginalized citizens. As Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) note, the primary purpose of PIOs is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing. From being mere recipients of information—“downloaded” by government offices—citizens should transform into critical, engaged and active participants of the public information process. This is consistent with OG/OGD Principles 12 to 14—Public Input, Public Review and Coordination.

As citizens have now become co-creators of content, they define their own information needs and requirements and participate in the production and exchange of content using various channels and formats. The PIO’s role in a “citizens-as-content-co-creator-setting” includes facilitating, capacitating and providing the platforms for active engagement.

It must be noted that supply orientation is a weakness in some open data platforms. Government agencies provide information on how to access data sets and tools, such as, infographics, to make the information easy to understand.

Some platforms encourage the public to request for the data they need and send feedback, but there is a need for more proactive

mechanisms that would allow citizens to be co-creators or co-administrators of these platforms.

The concept of public space in open government highlights the importance of virtual space, as it allows immediate access to unlimited information. Three major concerns involved here are: first, the extent by which internet freedom is recognized and practiced; second, the issue of digital divide wherein marginalized individuals/groups (in terms of gender, ethnic class, economic group, etc.) are denied access and participation in the virtual world; and, finally, retooling of public information officers, specifically in digital/computer literacy.

According to the Freedom of the Net 2015 report, internet freedom around the world has declined for the fifth consecutive year as more governments have engaged in the “censorship of information of public interest, while also expanding surveillance and cracking down on privacy tools.” The topics commonly censored online are directly related to the practice of open government: mobilization for public causes, criticism of authorities, corruption, conflict, and social commentary.

Related to Internet Freedom is the provision of reliable (government) data/information. OG/OGD Principles 9 to 11 provide for Publishing Data with Permanence, Trust and Provenance.

Some Challenges in Pursuing the 21st Century Public Information Paradigm

a. Recognition of the New Role of Public Information in Good Governance

Among traditional PIOs, there should be recognition and acceptance that change is inevitable, and that changes must be reflected in all dimensions of competencies—knowledge, attitudes, values and behaviors. More-of-the-same kind of thinking and practices shall no longer suffice. Traditional roles have to give way to new game-changing roles.

b. Investment in Public Information

There seems to be under investment in public information work compared to expenses in public infrastructure. This is partly due to the political leaders' lack of recognition of the contributions of public information to development. Investment in public information work includes reengineering of organizational structures; retooling of officials and personnel; and new tools, equipment and facilities.

c. Seamless Integration and Collaboration

Public information should not be perceived as a separate element of governance. Transparency, accountability and citizen participation should be second-nature to all public officials concerned or involved with government transactions and programs.

All public officials must also acknowledge that public information work is inherent in their duties and responsibilities (although PIOs may play a lead role). Every public servant must engage in 21st century public information work as described in this paper. Pursuing open government/open government data is, and should be, a collective responsibility of all government functionaries.

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He has co-authored six books, co-edited 15 books/monographs, written over 10 handbooks/ modules, published numerous articles in international and national books, journals, and monographs. Among his publications are: *Multidisciplinary Inquiry on the Culture of Impunity in the Killing of Journalists* (2013), and *Media and Information Literacy: Curriculum for Teachers* (UNESCO Paris, 2011). He has contributed in several international publications including

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