

Towards an information democracy: A research agenda

Albert K. Boekhorst

People, organisations and societies need knowledge to satisfy their needs, so that they can survive, develop themselves and move forward in time and space. This knowledge is about themselves, and their social and physical surroundings. Those who are better equipped than others are able to satisfy their information needs in an effective and efficient way. They can participate in the relevant information networks and are more capable to survive and develop themselves than those in less advantageous circumstances. However, there are barriers that complicate, or can even block, successful access to needed information and to the information economy. Four types of potential barriers based on interdependencies between people – economic, political, affective and cognitive – are described.

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Author's details

Prof. Dr Albert K. Boekhorst

University of Amsterdam, Mediastudies, Turfdraagsterpad 9, 1012 XT Amsterdam, The Netherlands;
University of Pretoria, South Africa; and Talliin University, Estonia

☎ + 31 – 653 54 7573

✉ boekhorst@uva.nl

🌐 www.hum.uva.nl/akb

Introduction

People, organisations and societies need information to satisfy their needs so they can survive, develop themselves and move forward in time and space – knowledge of themselves and their social and physical surroundings. Those who are better off than others are able to satisfy their information needs in an effective and efficient way, and participate in the relevant information networks. They are more capable to survive and develop themselves than those in less advantageous circumstances.

However, there are barriers that complicate, or can even block, successful access to needed information and to the information economy. We distinguish four types of potential barriers that are based on interdependencies between people: economic, political, affective and cognitive.

Economic barriers

Economic relations refer to the fact that people are dependent on the production and distribution of scarce resources, including food, clothing and housing. Information can also be seen as a quantifiable unit to which one can assign a value depending on supply and demand. Since the 1970s, information is often seen as the fourth production factor, which functions as the driving force of the economy. This means the application of supply and demand factors is applicable to the production, use and control of information. This includes not only the information itself, but also the infrastructure that is needed.

At the same time, producing information products is relatively much more profitable than industrial or agricultural ones. As information needs a carrier and an infrastructure, we distinguish between content, technical infrastructure and a social infrastructure. For each of these elements the laws of supply and demand are applicable.

Discussion item 1

The uneven distribution of wealth in the world leads to differences in infrastructure and the possibility to “buy” and “sell” information products. This is relevant for both technical

infrastructure and social infrastructure. The information economy is dominated by Western countries. For information products, this can be demonstrated by checking ISSN, ISBN and patents by country. The digital divide is mainly an “economic” problem.

Research item 1

The implementation of open source software and academic repositories for scientific information, suitable for the African situation, should be investigated. In addition, there is a need for possibilities of affordable access to general information for development and recreation.

The World Bank produces annual World Development Reports (WDRs). They offer invaluable access to the economic, social and environmental state of the world today. Each year, the WDR provides an in-depth analysis of a specific aspect of development.

Political barriers

Political relations are the effect of people’s need to protect themselves against physical constraint and the aggression of others. To obtain this, a regulation of violence is needed whereby specialists can enforce their power. Hereby the law and order of a society is formally stipulated. These rules have reference to all relationships people have with one another. Laws on information are, for example, regulations on authors’ rights, archive laws, access to government information and press freedom. These legislations can be seen as political regulations through which access to certain types of information is controlled.

Discussion item 2

Access to information is not guaranteed in all countries in the same way. Some countries have legislation that entitles their citizens access to government information and/or to files on themselves, while others have not.

Research item 2

A comparative investigation into “openness” to (government) information and legislation on information privacy can give insight into formal

barriers to information, both for retrieval and dissemination. "Over seventy countries around the world have implemented some form of freedom of information legislation" (Wikipedia, n.d.).

Affective barriers

Affective relations refer to the fact that people have feelings for each other. People need each other for affection, love and support. These friendships and emotional relations are not limited only to other people, but also include objects and organisations that are appropriate to a person's culture. Computers and other information sources, such as books, computers, CDs and television, can also be included.

This affinity has reference not only to the information type, but also to the information itself. For example, differences in the appreciation of diverse forms of ballet and poetry are noted from the sales figures of books/magazines and the user records of public libraries. Of course, emotional factors such as anxiety, frustration and confidence do influence the search process.

Discussion item 3

The format in which information is made public can influence the ease of access for people and the chance to sell it. Information products and transfer are mainly based on (digital) texts and are not very accessible for persons and societies with an oral tradition. The law of less effort is also applicable here.

Research item 3

Research is needed on how to access people who need information for development from printed and digital resources, while they were brought up in an oral tradition. Among others, Kuhlthau (2004) and Brenda Dervin have given attention to the emotional aspects in search processes.

Cognitive barriers

Cognitive relations refer to the fact that people are dependent on one another because they learn from each other. People create knowledge and distribute this among one another in the form of

information. Up to the development of writing, people communicated mainly through speech and verbal communication. Writing and printing made it possible for information to be disseminated in spite of borders of time and space. Learning from each other happens in diverse ways and is not limited to education at school.

The scope and content that are taught to people depend on their social position and societal relations. An illiterate farmworker in the 18th century was not as affected by his illiteracy as an illiterate Westerner in the first decade of the 21st century. To be able to survive and develop themselves, people, organisations and societies need to be information literate. Information literacy is strongly connected with lifelong learning. National governments should give attention to the recognition of lifelong learning and information literacy as key elements for the development of generic capabilities, which must be required for the accreditation of all education and training programmes.

Discussion item 4

Ongoing technisation, differentiation and globalisation (informatisation process) lead to an explosion of information accessible via a variety of information media and channels. More skills and knowledge than ever before are needed to locate, select and evaluate the information that is required to satisfy a person's information needs to be able to move forward in time and space.

Being able to distinguish information needs, and being able to satisfy these needs effectively and efficiently, is called being "information literate". The informatisation process asks for continuing attention to information literacy in all phases of formal and informal schooling to prepare learners for successful lifelong learning and to empower them to be productive members of their society.

Research item 4

Tools should be developed for the implementation of information literacy in the regular curricula of schools. The role of school, public and academic libraries should also be made clear. The Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning offers an excellent

departure for the assessment and implementation of integrated information literacy in all levels of schooling.

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