

Improving the provision of government e-information opportunities in Tanzania

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Key Messages

1. E-information adoption is high, but some other essential publications such as circulars are not available on some websites of government ministries
2. E-information benefits, introduction of government guidelines, discretionary powers, performance of government officials, government structure, and membership requirements for Open Government Partnership (OGP) influenced the provision of e-information opportunities
3. Promotion of online information, people's attitudes, advantages of the practice, demographic features, and digital divide influence the rates of utilisation of e-information opportunities
4. Removing discretionary powers from the technical standards and guidelines for government websites will increase the e-information adoption rate, as all government entities will be required to provide specified publications

Introduction

The Internet has the potential to improve public administration, service delivery, and citizen engagement (Castells, 2009; Chadwick, 2006, 2013). In the early 2000s, the Tanzania government adopted online government information provision and established the technical standards and guidelines for government websites in 2014 (United Republic of Tanzania, 2014). E-information stands for provision of information via government websites and social media pages. The latest research shows that the government ministries provide many e-information opportunities, and citizens utilise them, but some other critical information is missing on their websites.

This brief has two purposes: first, to illustrate the extent of and factors influencing e-information adoption; and, second, to suggest the way for improving its adoption.

The mixed-method approach was used to collect and analyse data while Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) theory established by Rogers (2003) supported the analysis. Data sources were websites and social media pages of government ministries, government officials, and academics and researchers.

Findings

The findings cover the provision and utilisation of e-information opportunities.

Provision of e-information opportunities

Most government ministries provided information opportunities on their websites. However, such opportunities varied across information categories and government ministries. The information aspects are legislations (Acts and regulations), plans/ strategies/ programmes/ projects, budget speeches, reports, and statistics. As Table 1 shows, only the availability of budget speeches, and legislation on government websites was above the e-information provision average, which hovered at around 57%.

Table 1. Provision of Online Information Opportunities Based on Information Categories

Information category	Score (Min = 0, Max = 8)	%
Policy	4.00	50
Legislation (Act/ Regulations)	4.92	62
Plan/ Strategy/ Programme/ Project	4.38	55
Budget speech	6.80	85
Report	3.66	46
Statistics	3.66	46

Source: Fieldwork data, 2016

Furthermore, as Table 2 depicts, of eight, only four government ministries scored above 50% in providing e-information opportunities, which are indicated in Table 1. Surprisingly, one government ministry did not provide any of the information categories (see again Table 2).

Table 2. Provision of Online Information Opportunities by Government ministries

Government ministry code	Score (Min=0, Max=6)	Percentage
A ₈	5.00	83
A ₇	4.66	78
A ₂	4.23	71
A ₆	4.00	67
A ₄	3.00	50
A ₁	2.58	43
A ₅	1.00	17
A ₃	0.00	0

Source: Fieldwork data, 2016

As social media are also used to communicate information and news, the study indicates that of four government ministries, three posted information and news on their social media pages. In the six months, one-third (32%; n=12) of academics and researchers visited government social media pages, but only half of them (50%; n=6) witnessed the government providing information via such media. However, since the government ministries opened such pages, they did not use them to share information and news continuously (see Table 3).

Table 3. Number of Postings on Social Media Pages of Government Ministries

Government ministry code	Facebook Pages		Twitter Accounts		YouTube Channels	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
B ₁	0	0	0	0	0	0
B ₂			23	100	2	100
B ₃	14	77.8				
B ₄	4	22.2				
Total	18	100	23	100	2	100

Note: Blank means Not Applicable

Source: Fieldwork data, 2016

There are factors which influenced the instances of e-information provision revealed in the study. First, the practice increased efficiency; for example, the cost of printing budget speeches fell, and people accessed them concurrently and remotely.

Second, as the government introduces the innovation guidelines before starting using the innovations, the technical standards and guidelines of running the government websites increased e-information opportunities. Third, the discretionary powers of deciding the publications to be available online affected the provision of the opportunities. Fourth, the performance of government officials responsible for updating information on their websites also determines the availability of information. Fifth, the government structure also explained the extent of provision of e-information opportunities; for example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and East African Cooperation has fewer information categories because it coordinates foreign-related government functions. Finally, OGP membership requirement contributed to increasing of e-information opportunities, but from 2017, Tanzania terminated its membership (Open Government Partnership, 2015).

One government official illustrated the contribution of OGP as follows: “Tanzania is a member of one forum known as OGP; we joined some few years back, something like three or four years back, which requires transparency. The website is one of the means that show transparency - to show what the government is doing, what the ministry is doing.”

The utilisation of e-information opportunities

Addressing the second question, many people utilise e-information opportunities which were available on the websites and social media pages of government ministries, and government portal. For example, as Table 4 shows, on average, 60% (n=26) of academics and researchers visited ministry websites and government portal. Annually, 74% (n=31) of academics and researchers used reports and statistics while 68% accessed policies. Very few of them utilised circulars, newsletters, and gazette, but they used them four times a year. However, 77% (n=28) of such people continued to visit government office buildings to get information because such information was not on their websites though a few people still preferred physical information.

The experience of one government official of those who still used print publications was: “They still choose information in a print format even though they are told that it is accessible online. Some people are aware, but they find that physical visit like queueing or physical information, that is, information which is in print format as genuine or credible.”

Table 4. Annual Preferences of Academics and Researchers to Access Government Information

Frequency	Ministry website	Government portal	Ministry social media page	Government office (physical building)
None	2.4% (1)	7.1% (3)	74.3% (26)	23.1% (9)
Once	2.4% (1)	11.9% (5)	2.9% (1)	12.8% (5)
Twice	9.5% (4)	11.9% (5)	5.7% (2)	15.4% (6)
Three times	7.1% (3)	4.8% (2)	5.7% (2)	10.3% (4)
Four times	7.1% (3)	14.3% (6)	2.9% (1)	10.3% (4)
Five or more times	71.4% (30)	50% (21)	8.6% (3)	28.2% (11)
Total	100% (42)	100% (42)	100% (35)	100% (39)

Source: Fieldwork data, 2016

Furthermore, most academics and researchers used all the information categories for working (98%; n=42) and studying (90%; n=34) while some (53%; n=16) consumed it for non-work and non-academic endeavours.

There are also factors which influenced the utilisation of e-information opportunities. First, the promotion of online information made people aware of the information material and used them. For example, one government ministry remained with many printed budget speeches in their publications store after starting publicising their budget speeches as pointed out above. Second, utilisation is dependent on the provision of e-information opportunities. Third, attitudes towards e-information also influence the utilisation of online information; for instance, as indicated earlier, a few people used physical information because they thought online information was not authentic.

However, most people found that e-information was more convenient than a traditional practice.

Fourth, demographic features of people such as age, education level, literacy also explained the utilisation of e-information opportunities; for example, young people prefer online information to a physical one. Finally, the digital divide, which is wider in rural than urban area, influenced the utilisation of such opportunities.

Conclusion and recommendation

The results indicate that the government’s provision of e-information opportunities has not reached its full potential. They further show that on the one hand, the discretionary powers of government ministries, relative advantages, OGP membership requirement, government structure and performance of officials influenced the provision of information opportunities. On the other hand, interdependence between provision and utilisation, perception of authenticity of e-information, awareness, individual citizen characteristics like age and education level and digital divide explained utilisation patterns.

Because the discretionary powers are embedded in the guidelines, reaching a higher level of e-information opportunities provision than the current one becomes difficult.

A significant challenge appears to be the discretionary powers granted to government ministries, departments and agencies to decide on the information category to disseminate. In order to improve the provision of government e-information opportunities, the brief recommends an amendment of the guidelines in section 2.5.3 (ii) (United Republic of Tanzania, 2014, p. 13) by replacing the term 'may' with 'should' or 'must' to remove discretionary powers from the government ministries, departments and agencies. That change will direct them to include all listed information categories unless their functions bar them from generating specified publications.

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