**What information: Where, how and for whom?**

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Abstract.

This paper focuses on a consideration of the concept of ‘information sharing’, about which a common understanding is frequently, and dangerously, assumed. The context is specifically Saint Lucia, although modern conditions mean that it will be necessary to include regional and global considerations. It proposes ideas on which information should be shared, and which should not. Who should the sharers be, and when is it appropriate to institute restrictions? It also suggests locations and mechanisms for sharing, and the types of information particularly appropriate to each space and each tool. Finally a part of the paper will be dedicated to a brief discussion of the current emphasis on ‘participation’, the ways in which this becomes synonymous with the underlying philosophy of information sharing, and the contribution that this can make to effective governance for sustainable development.

When I began thinking about this paper everything seemed very clear to me. In a world, or at least a Saint Lucia, in which we are being herded willy-nilly towards information sharing, e-government, Facebook, Twitter etc. it would be desirable to step aside and ask some questions. The theme of this conference is ‘Information sharing for sustainable development’. It’s a wonderful theme for a research conference because it opens the door to so many questions. Is it intended to state what we are doing here? We are/will be each bringing our contribution of information. The phrase implies that the act of sharing information in itself will bring about sustainable development. Or does it really imply that? Does the ‘for’ mean something more like ‘towards’, that by sharing information we hope to bring about sustainable development? By sharing do we mean giving, passing on, or is there some type of two-way system intended, of exchange and assimilation? And what do we assume from the words ‘sustainable’ and ‘development’?

And then the peripheral questions.What is information? We use the word frequently these days. We belong to the ‘information society’, or perhaps it is ‘an’ information society. We use information and communication technology (ICT), but whilethere is a good deal of discussion about the communication and the technology, somehow we take the information for granted as if it were a discrete, concrete thing.

In 1934 the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gassetaddressed the International Congress of Bibliographers and Librarians, meeting in Paris. In his paper[[1]](#footnote-2) he proposes a distinction between ‘the book’ and ‘the vital function of the book’ which may assist us to think about information. He warned his audience that:

The book has ceased to be an attraction and is felt instead as a heavy load. The man of science himself observes that one of the great difficulties of his work is to orient himself in the bibliography of his subject.

Having identified what he perceived to be the problem, he went on to define the ‘Mission of the Librarian’ – the title of his paper.

Up until this present, the librarian has been principally occupied with the book as a thing, as a material object. From now on he must give his attention to the book as a living function. He must become a policeman, master of the raging book.

At the end of his paper Ortega revisits the dangers that the ‘raging book’ sets in the path of ‘ordinary minds’:

Today people read too much. The condition of receiving without much effort, or even without any effort, the innumerable ideas contained in books and periodicals has accustomed the common man to do no thinking on his own account; and he does not think over what he has read, the only method of making it truly his own.

Finally he proposes ‘the librarian of the future as a filter interposed between man and the torrent of books’. All this in 1934 when what he describes as ‘the vital function of the book’ was still more or less constrained on paper and between covers, long before the almost ubiquitous internet threw open the lid of Pandora’s box.

And of course we cannot make judgements about the effectiveness of information sharing in this context until we have established who or what is to be sustainably developed. Saint Lucia and Saint Lucians presumably, but what and who are they?

Last week Her Excellency the Governor General, Dame PearletteLouisy, gave the Patricia Charles Memorial Lecture Negotiating a national agenda for development : The role of culturein which she asked questions about development, culture and identity. I will be returning to Her Excellency’s paper to assist with some of the definitions for identity and development that are needed to address the current topic. In the discussion which followed her paper Dr. Fletcher commented on the deluge of information which threatens to drown us all, and the interaction between this information and national culture and identity.

Before I ask my first question – what information? –I would like to recall some of the definitions offered to us last week by Her Excellency. She prefers Norman Girvan’s third concept of development which she summarises thus:

This concept asserts that development is about people; and that all of the people and the groups in society should be both beneficiaries and participants in the process.

I also borrow from her paper a quotation from Clive Thomas:

But if development and change are about people, then it is they who should ultimately choose what path theywish to pursue. Individuals and groups can offer ideas,suggestions and leadership, but the ultimate test of their efficacy lies in the willingness of the people toadopt them as part of their daily lives

These descriptions suggest that development should be a socially inclusive process – ‘about people’.

There is considerable debate over what constitutes ‘sustainable’ development. An intersection is proposed between environmental, economic and social spheres, with conditions that are bearable, equitable and viable thus leading to sustainability



**Sustainable development[[2]](#footnote-3)**

The ICT for development literature distinguishes five main types of sustainability: financial, social, institutional, technological and environmental. If we are assuming the missing words at the end of the theme phrase for the conference to be ‘of Saint Lucia for all Saint Lucians’ then it becomes necessary to place considerable emphasis on social sustainability, working on a second assumption that our culture and identity reflect in our society.

So what type of information can we share to lead to sustainable development within our society?Her Excellency in her lecture, citing her Throne Speech, made referenceto the fact that we are not accustomed to sharing information.

For too long, we have stood by expecting someone elseto solve the problems which we ourselves have createdand chosen to live with, keeping our skills and our talents to ourselves, counting our pennies and ourproblems, pretending that we are not also responsiblefor building this island of ours into a better place.

(Throne Speech, 2012)

Therefore it was heartening to discover that the delegatesat a series of workshops held in Saint Lucia over the past two years as part of the International Telecommunications Union Enhancing Competitiveness in the Caribbean through the Harmonization of ICT Policies, Legislation and Regulatory Procedures regional project(HIPCAR), agreed unanimously that government information should be freely available, any restrictions occurring as exceptions. These delegates were drawn from all sections of society including government itself. Sadly this apparently liberal attitude is qualified by the proviso ‘except in the interests of national security’, which in the current global climate excuses all restrictions on citizen freedom by politicians and bureaucrats.

However Saint Lucia is on its way to having a Freedom of Information Act, consultations on the bill having been held in 2011[[3]](#footnote-4).This law would be a partner to the Data Protection Act, which ‘defines the legal basis for the handling of an individual’s personal information’[[4]](#footnote-5).

In other parts of the world efforts are being made to give constitutional protection to the Information Rights of the citizen. More and more it is being accepted that social co-operation demands the exchange of information, and the nature and behaviour of information are changing in a digital environment so that the rights must extend beyond open government and freedom of information. An important change in this new environment is the possibility of citizen participation in the creation of public policy. Mark Bovens, director of the Utrecht School of Governance at Utrecht University in the Netherlands suggests three levels of rights[[5]](#footnote-6):

* Primary information rights that give citizens direct claims on actual (government) information
* Secondary information rights that require government to support citizen access to information channels
* Tertiary information rights that require government to provide a framework only to support access to non-government information

Open access to public government information has the effect of encouraging social and economic participation, providing legal certainty and strengthening democratic accountability. The citizen can become aware not only of policies themselves but of drafts and preparatory material to the extent that he or she can participate in policy creation. The basic premise is that all information is public unless there are‘weighty and specific reasons’ for an exception to be made as with the ‘national security’ exception mentioned above, and the citizen’s right to privacy.

Information should be physically, financially and intellectually accessible. Government should make raw data – for example statistical information – accessible, but it can also be proactive in providing digests summaries and expert systems. This all becomes possible using information technology. It is not proposed that citizens should have the right to hard copies of information which would be prohibitively expensive.Bovens contends that the citizen’s right to access comes without a concomitant obligation to read the material. This signals a subtle shift in the perception of the relationship between government and citizen to a realization of the claim that government exists to serve the people.

Not only should government make information accessible, it should also support the citizen’s access to information channels[[6]](#footnote-7). This access is not only a matter of geographic distribution, but may also be a matter of training in literacy and information skills. And finally government should provide a framework of legal regulations to assure the rights of citizens to public information from private organisations that serve society.

The body of information described above is probably what people think of when information rights are mentioned. However there is a backlash in the move towards what is called ‘Open data’. Where originally it was assumed that increasing access would lead to general empowerment it is being discovered that what happens is that the already empowered become further empowered. We need to take care to ‘Mind the gap’; the ‘digital divide’ between those with and those without access to the new technologies is rapidly changing into a ‘data divide’ between those who are and those who are not able to benefit from the provision of Open Government Data. The issue here is the possibility for ‘effective use’ of the content to which the citizen is being provided access.

However there is a different type of content that can be demonstrated to empower even the illiterate, and that is the self-generated content that can emerge if the opportunity for sharing is provided. One example is a project called Swara in India.

CGNetSwara provided connectivity to the internet through phones. Anyone can call a phone number which connects him to a computer/server on which he/she can record a message and listen to others who have left messages, simply by selecting an option from a pre recorded message which is played out.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Here the mechanism is voice reporting by mobile phone. This mechanism manages to overcome issues of language and literacy to give a voice to the socially disadvantaged and previously voiceless. It allows for the sharing and aggregation of many small items of local information.

Most of the phenomena connected with the new information society are at the same time opportunities and threats. Globalisation turns the world into a ‘global village’. This means that our little island is able to share in the ideas of the whole world. We are no longer isolated, on the edge. Suddenly we have the whole world available literally at our finger tips. But in that whole world our voice is a very tiny voice. We can hear everyone else but our own voice sinks to a barely perceptible whisper. Later this morning Dr. Ulrike Krauss will be giving a paper ‘Alien Species Invading our Daily Lives in St. Lucia’. One of the warnings from my paper is that ‘alien information is invading our daily lives in Saint Lucia’ and we must learn how to preserve our identity through this invasion.

Let us return briefly to the questions Her Excellency asked in her lecture last week.

What exactly are the distinctive features of our St LucianSociety ? What are our value systems ?our beliefs ?Who are we now ? Or alternatively, who do we want to be ?

Against the blare of information from outside if we don’t know already we are very unlikely to find out unless we make a conscious effort. To find out we need to look at ourselves, exchange our information, create our own content. We need to do as Her Excellency proposed in her paper and launch:

a multi-disciplinary collaborative research project … to study our ways of living and to generate that body of information that will give us insights into who we are and how we engage with the world around us.

In a paper[[8]](#footnote-9) presented in February 2010 Dr Terence Farrell proposed statistics about and reasons for the overwhelming presence of material from the United States in our regional broadcast media. He writes:

The great irony is that 40 years later, we have many more radio and television stations, more cinemas (though in multi-screen cineplexes), access to hundreds of cable channels and we are consuming even more foreign content than we were in the 1960s and 1970s

While this consumption is tied closely to the relative cost of programmes, he presents several reasons why this is undesirable: taste formation, violence and crime, community values and attitudes, role models and heroes. He proposes a model to encourage the generation and broadcast of local content.

In May 2011 Dr Keith Nurse, who for many years has complained of the tendency of people in the Caribbean to value the foreign more than the local, is reported in the Trinidad Guardian as proposing that ‘Port-of-Spain can become the creative city of the English-speaking Caribbean[[9]](#footnote-10).’ So perhaps some progress is being made.

So far the discussion has been centred on what information might be shared, but should there be any restriction on this sharing? We have suggested that there may be ‘weighty and specific reasons’ like national security to limit information sharing, and also that individual privacy needs protection. In the matter of privacy there is a marked difference of perspective between North America and Europe. In Europe individual privacy as regards the processing of personal data and the movement of that data is ensured by public authorities. In the United States such protection is left to self-regulation, complemented by federal laws protecting particular aspects of privacy like financial privacy, children’s privacy and medical privacy. This leaves individuals in a more vulnerable position[[10]](#footnote-11). The Caribbean lies between Europe and the United States and should be aware of the dichotomy. This is an area in which a Caribbean perspective is urgently needed.

The HIPCAR initiative mentioned above has worked assiduously to collect input from the community level into the shaping of policies and legislation to govern the local and the regional ‘information society’[[11]](#footnote-12). It is very desirable that such dialogue be maintained particularly in the light of the move towards e-government in Saint Lucia. As Bovens described (see above) a desirable outcome of citizen access to public government information is an informed citizenry who can participate in the creation of policy.

The other questions on our original agenda are where, how and for whom. But these questions prompt a larger proposal. Currently the East Caribbean Telecommunications Authority (ECTEL) is working on the draft of an Electronic Communications Bill[[12]](#footnote-13). A second public consultationwas held in April this year. This bill addresses issues of telecommunications physical infrastructure, obviously of vital concern if electronic communications, and hence that medium of information sharing are to be possible. However, we also need to create an ‘information infrastructure’, a framework which will facilitate information sharing, with the emphasis on ‘information’. So let us revisit those final questions, but in reverse order.

**For whom?**

As regards information rights are all Saint Lucians equal? What, for example, is our cultural response to the issue of information rights for children? First of all, how do we define the concept of ‘child’? Should there be restrictions on the information available to children? If we feel that such restrictions should exist, then should the restriction be managed on the basis of ‘opt out’ or ‘opt in’ – in other words should the restriction be applied universally with the possibility for adults to circumvent it, or should the default situation be ‘no restriction’ with concerned adults being offered the option of choosing to apply the restriction? The first optionprovides much better safety for children, but some adults see it as limiting individual freedom in an unacceptable manner[[13]](#footnote-14).

Earlier we considered the Sarwa project in India. If we argue that all Saint Lucians have a right to information then our ‘information infrastructure’ must be proactive in support of the information marginalised. Many things can create information marginalisation – poverty, disability, lack of education, language. The infrastructure should identify and address the causes of marginalisation. Of all groups the people with disabilities may be the most marginalised and deprived, and yet the ones who may benefit most if information sharing is facilitated. For all sectors of the population there will be those who are marginalised because they do not have information skills. For this reason I would propose that acquisition of the skills of information seeking, assessment, evaluation and sharing should be built into the school curriculumfrom the beginning, and that training in this area should be offered to adult learners.

As well as considering what might be done, it is also extremely important to learn what not to do. A major consideration in the area of ‘not tos’ is plagiarism. Apart from the fact that plagiarism is dishonest – and surely honesty is one of the values that we would wish for Saint Lucians – it also erodes creativity and innovation and leads to the lazy, even apathetic thinking of the type described by Ortega in the quotation at the beginning of this paper.

**How?**

In 1993 I was privileged to be present at one of the earliest demonstrations of a computer program called Mosaic[[14]](#footnote-15) which had been created by students at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. This was back in the dark ages when the term ‘web browser’ and the world wide web itself were just being invented. So for the last 20 years the Internet with all its glorious possibilities has been my first answer to the question ‘how?’ And the Internet has the advantage of being interactive, allowing users to be producers as well as consumers of information thus making the information flow both ways. But we should not forget the many other types of information and communication technologies.

Print on paper is still a very effective way of communicating information. For the literate, newspapers are still an important source of local information, and Saint Lucia has half a dozen newspapers. Books are not subject to the occasional vagaries of the electricity supply, nor do they vanish when the internet service provider has a problem. Since the arrival of the Internet books have gone out of fashion and been rather neglected but they are still a good source of useful information.

For those who don’t wish to read, according to Radio Station World[[15]](#footnote-16), Saint Lucia has seventeen different radio stations. We mustn’t forget that music is information too. Television gives us pictures as well as words and music, and is another rather neglected information source. Michael Walker, the Government of Taiwan and LIME have been implementing the In Time primary education project[[16]](#footnote-17) which uses television as a vehicle. Film is becoming popular and easy as a medium for recording local activities.

Mark Bovens, quoted earlier, proposed that governments might be proactive about presenting public information in an intellectually accessible manner. We are very fortunate in the exemplary work of the Statistical Department in Saint Lucia, but it is always possible to go further. While reading for this paper I discovered an article discussing ‘bricolage’ or ‘tinkering’ – an information management technique proposed by Prof. Claudio Ciborra[[17]](#footnote-18) at the London School of Economics. Ciborra suggested a continual re-arrangement of the information patterns to reveal new purposes. Another technique which appears worth investigating is Methods for Eliciting, Analysing and Specifying Users’ Requirements (MEASUR)[[18]](#footnote-19) proposed by Prof. Ronald Stamper. Rather than approaching the problem from the point of view of computer database requirements, Stamper’s method creates a model of the problem in the way that it is understood by the human mind. His ideas have been applied successfully all over the world.

**Where?**

The Internet has re-shaped our world and forced us to re-think how we perceive it. Where? is no longer a straightforward question. Nowadays the researcher who makes a film of a local potter working in Choiseul will probably use a digital medium. The film may then be uploaded to YouTube, which becomes the answer to where. But where is YouTube? For our purposes it is on our mobile phones, on our computers, perhaps relayed on television, so where ceases to matter.

For our Saint Lucian information infrastructure however it is desirable to indicate some physical spaces where information can be shared to ensure that ALL Saint Lucian citizens can be given access to information. An obvious first choice of location is the libraries. People are accustomed to using them as information resources and libraries have the advantage of having staff who already have training in information management. School buildings, before and after the school day also offer possibilities, if the issues of security and supervision can be resolved.

**Conclusion**

Last month the inaugural Open Government Partnership was held in Brazilia. The quotation that follows is taken from The Guardian (UK):

It's the inaugural conference of the Open Government Partnership in Brasilia this week. This is why you should care

Did you know that Indian citizens know more about private companies supplying public services than we do here in the UK?

A [grassroots campaign](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/apr/10/india-freedom-of-information) over many decades in India has led to a right to information law. Access to data about, among other things, government contracts, has already resulted in a reduction in corruption and fraud in central and local government.

That's just one example of the power of information - a lesson being discovered by citizens and governments all around the world. This is why the inaugural [Open Government Partnership event in Brasilia](http://www.opengovpartnership.org/calendar/annual-ogp-conference) matters this week[[19]](#footnote-20).

The organisers themselves claim to be ‘harnessing the power of openness to more effectivelyfight corruption, improve services, and create safer communities together[[20]](#footnote-21).’

The function of sustainable development is to cure poverty. Sir Arthur Lewis said ‘The fundamental cure for poverty is not money but knowledge.’ To create knowledge it is necessary to have information. In a democratic country, which we boast that we are, sovereignty belongs to the people, and sovereignty over information most of all.

Thank you

1. Jose Ortega y GassetThe Mission of the Librarian Translated by James Lewis & Ray Carpenter. G.K.Hall: Boston 1961 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Author :* Johann Dréo ([User:Nojhan](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User%3ANojhan))*Translator :* ([User:Pro\_bug\_catcher](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User%3APro_bug_catcher))

*Date :* March 9 2006/ Translated January 21 2007*Notes :* Inspired from [fr:Image:Developpement\_durable.jpg](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image%3ADeveloppement_durable.jpg). Translated from [Image:Developpementdurable.svg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ADeveloppement_durable.svg)

*other version:* [File:Sustainable development plnum.svg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ASustainable_development_pl_num.svg) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. A earlier draft of the bill is available at <http://ict.gov.lc/sites/default/files/Freedom%20of%20Information%20Bill%20-%2017Mar2010.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Source: [http://www.stlucia.gov.lc/nationalreview/2011/National%20Review%20August%2027,%202011%20-%20Issue%2021.pdf](http://www.stlucia.gov.lc/nationalreview/2011/National%20Review%20August%2027%2C%202011%20-%20Issue%2021.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Bovens, Mark (2002) Information Rights: Citizenship in the Information Society Journal of Political PhilosophyVol 10 #3 pp317-341 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. In Saint Lucia the Universal Access and Service Fund, administered by the National Telecommunications Regulatory Commission is used for these purposes. An explanatory powerpoint presentation can be found at www.itu.int/wtisd/2011/docs/initiatives/**saint**-**lucia**-**ntrc**.ppt

 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. More information at <http://www.newsmeback.com/blog/interview/interview-with-smita-choudhary-co-founder-of-the-cgnet-swara-india/> from which this quotation is taken. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Terrence W. Farrell Caribbean Identity And The Development Of The Creative Audio-Visual Industry: A Proposal Presented to the One Caribbean Media/CaribbeanTalesSymposium on The Production and Global Distribution of Caribbean Video and Film at The Best of CaribbeanTales Film Festival Barbados February 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Dixie-Ann Dickson, Economist Dr Keith Nurse: Cutting-edge entrepreneurship

<http://www.guardian.co.tt/business-guardian/2011/05/05/economist-dr-keith-nurse-cutting-edge-entrepreneurship> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. For a more complete discussion of the issues see Kurbalija, Jovan, An Introduction to Internet Governance, available online at <http://igf09.eg/IGF_English_2009_FINAL20091115115524.pdf> pp135-139 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Documentation available online at <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/projects/ITU_EC_ACP/hipcar/index.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. A copy of the draft Bill is available at <http://www.ectel.int/elec_communication_bill_pr.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. There is an interesting discussion of these issues in the April 17th issue of John Carr’s blog <http://johnc1912.wordpress.com/2012/04/17/in-search-of-seamless-safety-2/> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. More information at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosaic\_(web\_browser)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosaic_%28web_browser%29) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. <http://radiostationworld.com/locations/Saint_Lucia/radio_websites.asp> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. <http://focustaiwan.tw/SearchNews/hyDetailws.aspx?qid=201201080005&q=computer> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claudio_Ciborra> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. A description is available at <http://www.rstamper.co.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2012/apr/16/open-government-partnership-brasilia> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/public-leaders-network/2012/apr/03/brasilia-2012-open-government-partnership> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)