

Understanding Media & Information Literacy Requirements Needed for Successful Implementation of Open Government: Proposal of a Contextual-Participatory Approach

There is a wealthy body of literature on the “why” and “how” of media and information literacy (MIL) explaining why MIL is an inseparable component of knowledge societies and why it is a requirement for building a culture of Open Government (OG)²². However, this literature mainly reflects the outsiders’ perspectives. These include information literacy experts, media experts and advocates of the Information for All Programme.

Need for the “Players” Input

Although the outsiders’ views highlight some aspects of MIL, they do not address the “wants”, “wishes” and “worries” of those who are actually part of the OG formation process. These include **people, government and the media** who participate in, and contribute to, the creation and communication of information in the context of OG.

As a result, there is a gap between the outsiders’ definitions of MIL, and what MIL would actually mean in the actual contexts of OG, as perceived and experienced by those who play a part in it.

Conceptualizations with Players, by Players, as Playing

To fill the gap, this article proposes a contextual-participatory approach as it gives room to those whose lived experiences and concerns are the key source of insight for understanding situations and phenomena as suggested by Bergold and Thomas [2012]:

“Participatory research methods are geared towards planning and conducting the research process with those people whose life-world and

²² *Media and Information Literacy for Knowledge Societies. Proceedings of the International Conference (Moscow, 2012). Moscow: Interregional Library Cooperation Centre.*

Internet and Socio-Cultural Transformations in Information Society. Proceedings of the International Conference (Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, 2013). Moscow: Interregional Library Cooperation Centre.

meaningful actions are under study [...]. The participatory research process enables co-researchers to step back cognitively from familiar routines, forms of interaction, and power relationships in order to fundamentally question and rethink established interpretations of situations and strategies.”

Drawing on Nazari’s [2011, 2016] contextual study of information literacy, this approach suggests that to understand MIL requirements needed for successful implementation of OG we need to conceptualize MIL in the context of actual concepts and practices of OG as experienced or reported by the key players. In so doing, we need to get the players engaged in the conceptualization and implementation process of OG in real-life contexts, and throughout the process get them reflect on the MIL concept and components.

MIL and OG

MIL has been identified as a prerequisite for successful implementation of open government (OG), simply because MIL plays a crucial role in equipping the OG players with attitudes and competencies they need to build OG in a sustainable manner.

MIL refers to “essential competencies and skills to equip citizens in the 21st century with the abilities to engage with media and information systems effectively and develop critical thinking and life-long learning skills to socialize and become active citizens” [UNESCO 2014].

OG as a key element of democratic societies has been identified with three characteristics [Heller 2012]:

- “Information transparency: that the public understands the workings of their government;
- Public engagement: that the public can influence the workings of their government by engaging in governmental policy processes and service delivery programmes; and
- Accountability: that the public can hold the government to account for its policy and service delivery performance.”

Need for Contextual Conceptualization of MIL and OG Constructed by “Players”

Both OG and MIL are context-dependent concepts whose meanings may differ in various countries and in different sectors [De Blasio and Selva 2016]. This implies that to successfully implement OG, we first need to understand

how OG is perceived by those who contribute to its construction and its sustainability. This includes government, public, and media. Each plays a part:

- **Government** builds open government by considering three key characteristics: information transparency, public engagement and accountability.
- **Public** participates in the construction and maintenance of OG by sharing authentic information with the government and making ethical and effective use of information published by the government.
- **Media** contributes to the communication and sustainability of OG by engaging “mainstream news organizations with the principles of open government, and with civil society and the public over government information” [Media Council 2013].

The question arising here is: what MIL competencies does each of these players require to be able to construct and sustain OG in different contexts?

To answer this question, we need to explore the following issues:

- How is OG perceived by various players in different contexts?
- What does data or big data mean and in what areas can it be open, considering public policy in different countries?
- What are OG policies in terms of transparency, public participation and collaboration as well as the use of digital technology, in different countries?
- Within such contextual conceptions of OG, what constitutes MIL? What competencies does each group of players require to be able to perform effectively to build and sustain OG?

Need for Full Participation of “Players”

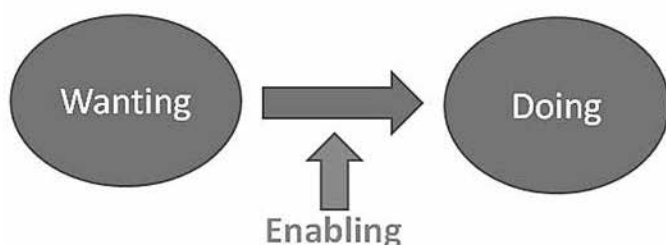
At the heart of the participatory approach there is a strong principle that promises results:

To make something happen in a sustainable manner, make consumers/users part of it.

Consumers/users are those who are going to benefit from the ultimate results. The more they get engaged in the building process, the higher are the chances that they use what they have made; simply because they see themselves part of it and have a sense of belonging to it.

Building a Culture of OG: Transforming “Wanting” into “Doing”

The journey begins with creating the sense of “wanting”, but unless we transform “wanting” into “doing” we may fail to achieve sustainable results.



“Wanting” comes from the awareness of the “Aha!” type, and “doing” is the result of empowerment, of “I can do it” type (Figure 1). To build OG as a culture, we should develop players who are informed and empowered. It is by then that they are able to become active participants of OG initiatives.

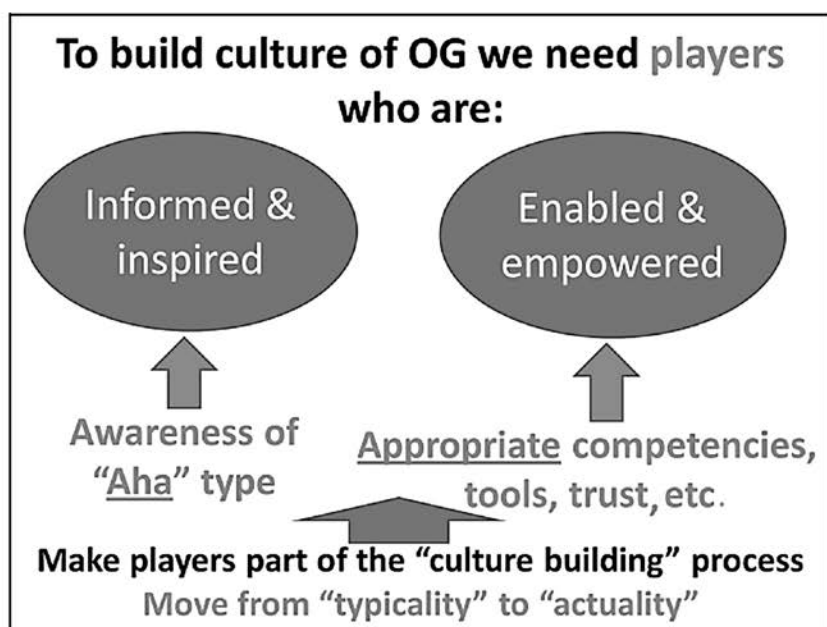


Figure 1. Informed and enabled players: a key requirement for building a culture of open government

Using a contextual-participatory approach, it will be possible to:

- Make players part of the process and output;
- Uncover the actual “wants”, “worries” and “wishes” of the government and other players;
- Co-create solutions, with a great sense of commitment to action;
- Touch the actual OG context of MIL;
- Understand the actual information process and MIL needed for the construction and implementation of OG.

Successful Open Government Initiatives: Ingredients

As mentioned above, to build a culture of OG, first we need players who are informed and inspired, that is, have a desire for OG. They should be informed about the advantages of OG in a way that they reach the point of “wanting” OG. Then they should to be empowered with proper resources, tools and trust. They also need to be enabled with appropriate competencies.

To make this transformation happen in a sustainable manner, players should become part of the “culture building” process, as suggested by the participatory research [Bergold and Thomas 2012]. The more and deeper they are engaged in the process of conceptualization of the OG and MIL concepts in real contexts, the more dedicated they become in the actualization process where these concepts are going to be implemented in the corresponding contexts.

Need for Constructive Conversations

As the final model of MIL will be constructed on the players’ perceptions and experiences of OG and their reflection on the various aspects of MIL, it is crucial that the participants get engaged in informative conversations. Conversations that would dig into their lived experiences about the phenomenon under study.

As presented in Figure 2, such informative conversations require two conceptual models, each of which should be built upon systematic reviews of relevant literature:

- one model should cover various aspects of MIL and corresponding concepts such as “knowledge society” and “information for all” practices;
- another model should cover the OG concept, advantages and challenges.

Provided that we select right people and employ right method(s) for data gathering, these two conceptual models can heavily facilitate the emergence of the patterns that we need to understand MIL in target context (OG).

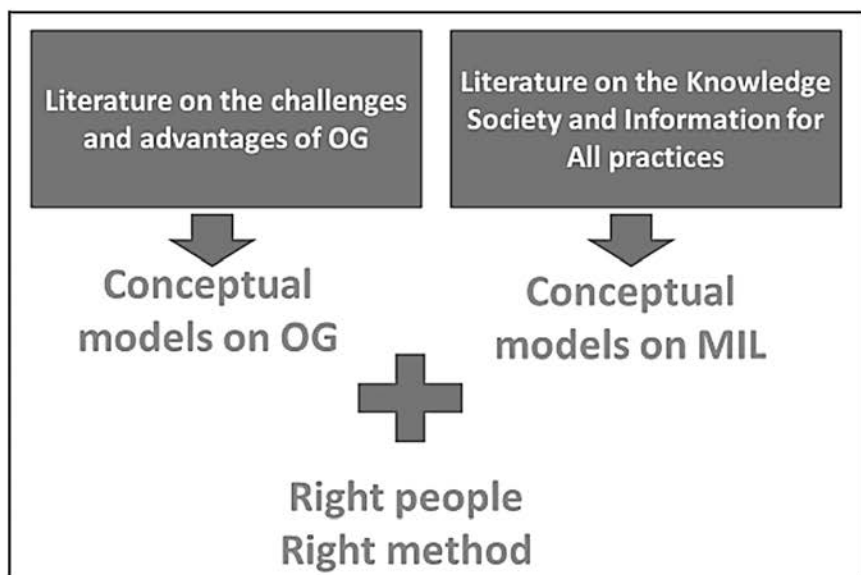


Figure 2. Ingredients needed for a constructive conversation in a participatory study

Right people are those who have the deepest knowledge, experience, contribution, and concerns on the phenomenon under study. Right method(s) are those that get the study participants dig into their lived experiences and relevant knowledge on the fieldwork questions.

Result-Oriented Fieldwork Design

When people become part of the OG process and open government becomes an inseparable part of a society, it signals a positive sign: OG has been implemented in a sustainable manner. To achieve such results, we need players who are informed about OG and are inspired by its benefits. The conceptual model of OG (the first ingredient) will play this part. This model, as mentioned earlier, will provide the study participants with some underpinnings on the characteristics, advantages, and challenges of OG. Depending on the context and selected participants for study (i.e. public, government, or media practitioners), each piece of the conceptual model will inform and inspire them in some way. For instance, advantages of OG can make the participants think and talk about the positive social impact of OG, economic development, and

public service improvements in society [Clarke and Margetts 2014; Taylor et al. 2014]. Challenges of OG can make the participants think and talk about challenges of citizen participation needed for the establishment of OG [Evans and Campos 2012].

Sustainable OG also requires players who are enabled and empowered by “appropriate” competencies, tools, and trust. To identify “appropriate” MIL competencies and other requirements, we need to listen to the experiences of those who participate in the OG conceptualization and implementation process, who have experiences and concerns on OG. These are our study participants. To help them think and talk holistically about the MIL requirements needed for OG, the second ingredient is needed: the conceptual model of MIL. By exposing participants to the conceptual model of MIL, while they are situated in some actual OG tasks, we enable them to share experiences and insights on MIL as needed for a successful implementation of OG.

It is through such informative and constructive conversations that we are able to deepen our understanding of the actual meaning of MIL as experienced in real-life OG practices. Such in-depth understanding will take us beyond the typical meanings of MIL offered by “outsiders”. They will get us closer to the actual meaning of MIL as reported by “players”.

Fieldwork in Action

To explore the “actuality” of MIL in the context of OG from the perspectives of different players we need to pause on the following questions:

- What does OG mean in different **countries** (or in a specific country)?
- What are the many faces of OG in different **sectors**?
- What does it take to make **government accept and commit** openness (in a specific context)?
- What does it take to make **public respect OG and behave** as civil societies?
- What does it take to make **the media report and interpret** information honestly?
- What does it take to build **trust** among the players?
- What MIL competencies does each player need to **act** effectively?

As shown in Figure 3, the fieldwork begins with situating the participants in a particular context and a specified role, it follows by engaging them in specific

tasks and ends by getting them reflect on the phenomenon while interacting with the context, role and task. And to guide the conversation constructively we use the two conceptual models.

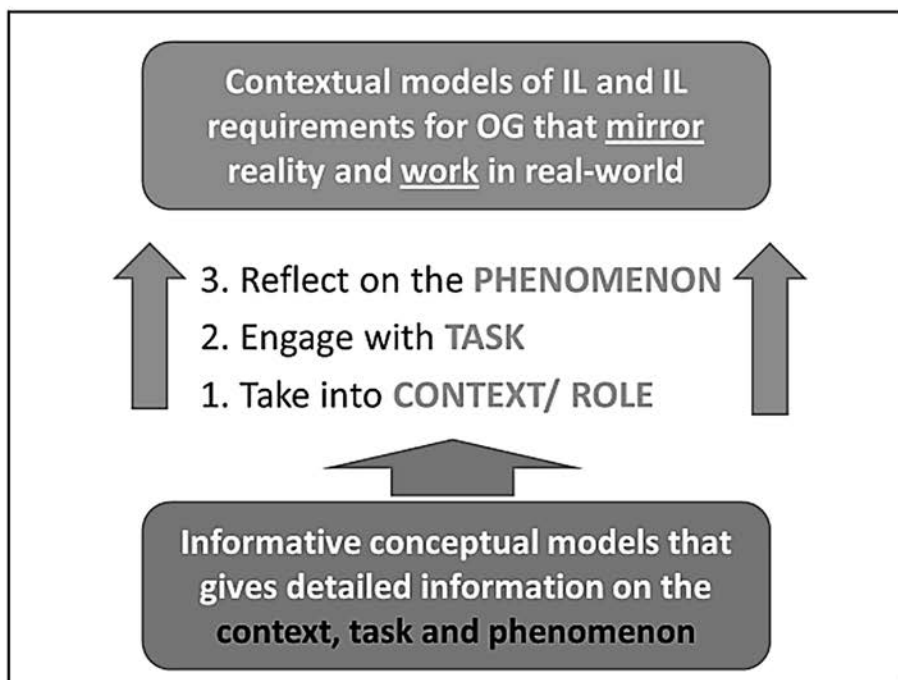


Figure 3. Contextual fieldwork using a situational approach

As shown in Figure 4, fieldwork questions should be addressed in specified contexts and in a situational manner.

Having selected a country, we should first focus on a particular sector, e.g. banking, health, transportation, education, as OG may mean different in different sectors.

Having identified the target sector for OG, we should focus on a particular role, considering the role of the players, whether they are government, public or media practitioners, as each group plays a different part in the formation and transformation of OG, hence they may have different perceptions and experiences of OG. The more specified selection we make, the deeper and detailed insights we may get on the actuality of OG. And the more detailed patterns on the actuality OG we get, the richer context we can develop to situate our study participants, that is, we can get our participants focused on the OG concept and process when exploring their perceptions and experiences of MIL.

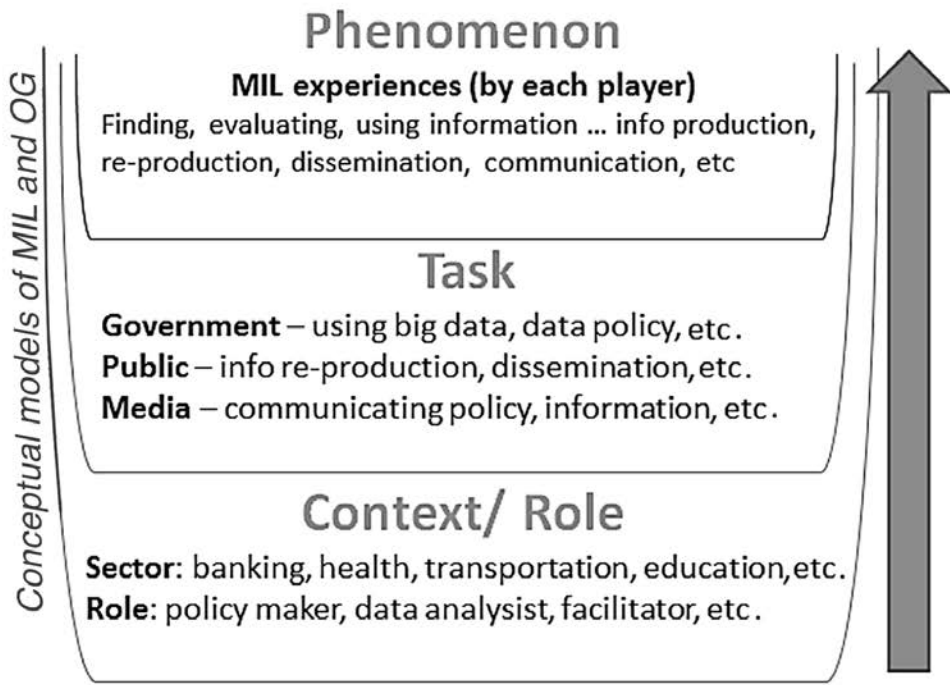


Figure 4. Fieldwork process in the contextual-participatory approach

With these considerations, it is very unlikely that the participants recall any irrelevant or generic MIL experiences. Whatever they say and share about MIL would mirror some actual aspects of OG as they see themselves in some actual OG-related tasks. In sum, by following the fieldwork process described above we are able to:

- dig into the unsaid and unthought of OG and MIL;
- capture the actual OG tasks and information processes within those tasks;
- identify actual problems, suggest feasible solutions or requirements needed for building a culture of OG.

As a result, the emergent MIL patterns generated by this approach will mirror reality, therefore they are applicable in real situations too, that is, they will inform stakeholders about the MIL requirements needed for successful implementation of OG in the specified context.

Expected Results

If employed properly, the results of contextual-participatory studies of MIL can help stakeholders overcome the communication challenge among the players.

Governments will accept openness and commit to it. This will create trust between people and governments.

Public will effectively and actively participate in OG initiatives as they see themselves as part of these initiatives. Empowered by proper MIL competencies, they are able to contribute to the establishment and growth of OG.

The media will report and interpret government policies and information honestly and will actively participate in the dissemination of OG.

Where Shall We Begin?

Due to the context-dependent nature of MIL and OG, every country should make their own MIL research agenda considering the following areas:

- the “what” and “how” of OG in their country;
- the “what” and “how” of OG in the selected sector;
- the “what” and “how” of OG for the selected role (i.e. government, citizens, and media practitioners and expected tasks in OG initiatives);
- the practice of OG by each player;
- media & information behavior of each player in the context of OG.

Contextual-participatory approach, as suggested in this article, if conducted properly in different countries and different sectors, can generate “best practical patterns of forming the system of open regions and open government”²³.

References

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²³ *Welcome greetings to the organizers and participants of the International Conference on Media and Information Literacy for Building Culture of Open Government (Khanty-Mansiysk, Russian Federation, 6-10 June, 2016). Greeting by Ms Natalia Komarova, Governor of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area – Ugra.*

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