Information Disclosure on Chinese Government Websites: A Literature Review

Li Wenxiao

School of Chinese Language and Literature, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, 510000, China

Abstract: *This paper presents an insight into studies from literature in the past 15 years, i.e., since the promulgation of the Regulations of the People's Republic of China on the Disclosure of Government Information. This paper demonstrates the different topics studies from various disciplines focus on, providing a brief review of Chinese government information disclosure conditions over the past 15 years.*

Keywords: *Government website; government information disclosure; government website information disclosure; literature review; E-government*

1. Overall Overview

Information disclosure on government websites refers to the government's choice to make government information and government work public on government websites, which has been a general way forward in the era of e-government and a reflection of the electronification of government administrative functions. Since the promulgation of the Regulation of the People's Republic of China on the Disclosure of Government Information (the Regulation) on January 17, 2007, the government website has become the first platform for information disclosure of the Chinese government. In recent years, studies of information disclosure on government websites, as a branch of the study of government information disclosure, have gradually become a new area of concern for researchers. This literature review provides a brief overview of the studies on information disclosure on government websites in the past 15 years since the adoption of the Regulation in 2007.

The research on government website information disclosure has lagged behind government information disclosure and government websites, and only received attention at the beginning of this century, but has become a hot topic in the past 15 years. The annual trend of government information disclosure-related publications available on China National Knowledge Infrastructure is shown in Figure 1.
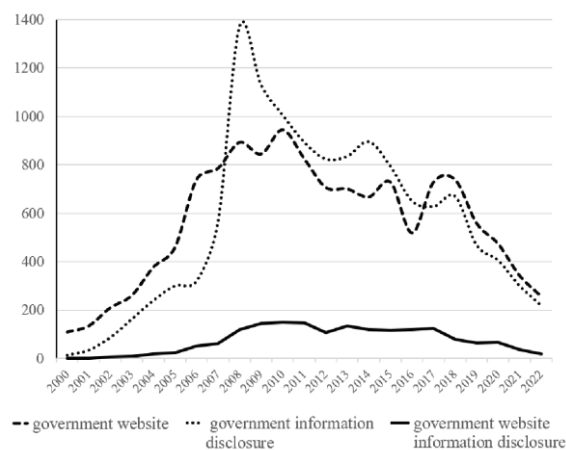

Figure 1: Annual trends in the publication of literature related

The studies related to government information disclosure show a spurt of growth and then a significant decrease after 2007, i.e., before and after the adoption of the Regulation, while the studies related to government websites show a milder fluctuation. On the other hand, studies related to government website information disclosure, though much smaller in scale, combine trends of the two, gradually maintaining a fluctuating downward yet overall stable trend after a surge around 2007.

2. Macro Research

In the past 14 years, the dominant form of study is to conduct theoretical investigation and model construction on the general status of government website information disclosure in one or several fields, such as law, administration, management, Internet technology, and communication. The main research methods are literature research, data analysis, expert interviews, etc. Researchers from different disciplines have explained the current environment and trends of Chinese government website information disclosure based on a literature survey and theoretical analysis. According to these researches, taking the four main disciplines as examples, we can broadly summarize the following overall trends and problems of Chinese government website information disclosure.

2.1 Administrative Management Perspective

Currently, the main bodies to carry out information disclosure on official websites are Chinese governments at all levels. With the continuous extending of disclosure, the bodies show a trend of spontaneous horizontal and vertical extension. The research on information disclosure on different subjects also diversifies, vertically extending from state, province, and city government to district and town government and horizontally expanding from the main body of government to institutions and sections of the government.

Yet the website ownership rate and service capacity are not equal. Although 90% of government agencies have carried out or completed the construction of government websites, the quality of websites and their role in government information disclosure are not optimistic[1]. Moreover, while the government website information disclosure is continuously developing, the information disclosure capability of departmental websites still needs to be explored and improved. The development of county-level government websites has lagged. The important role of government websites to bring closer government and citizens and improve service quality has not received sufficient attention from relevant county-level government departments[2]. Some provincial departments have not concretely implemented information disclosure into their work schedule, nor finely decomposed and incorporated it into the department's internal target accountability system, and a considerable number of departmental websites still suffer from the lack of supervision channels for information disclosure work. [3]

2.2 Law Perspective

Since the promulgation of the Regulations in 2007, the work of government information disclosure has continued to develop and deepen. To meet the needs for further modernization of the government governance system and governance capacity in the era of big data, the State Council has formulated a general framework for the development of e-government and issued numerous relevant policy documents. They include clear requirements for the opening process, name, domain name, web design, and the setting of management mechanisms for each government website, demonstrating a transformation from "+Internet" to "Internet+"[4].

The main problem lies at the legislative level, mainly reflected in the practical dilemma of the nature of the Regulations, i.e., it belongs to administrative regulations rather than laws. As a normative provision, the Regulation is inferior to laws of a similar nature, and its implementation is constrained by other general laws[5], which would lead to some governments using other legal provisions to limit the obligation of information disclosure under the Regulations, infringing on citizens' right to know, causing abuse of administrative discretion and greatly weakening the role of the Regulations.[6]

Another trouble resulting from the legal status of the Regulations is that it shows a certain derailment from the state legal system. As an administrative law that binds the government, the Regulation makes no mention of the People's Congress, to which the government is accountable and under whose supervision it is subject.[7] This reflects that the design of the current government information disclosure system largely ignores the logic of government and People's Congress power, or even contradicts it, and the confusion and fragmentation of different subjects in the process of government operation leads to constant problems. The promotion of government information disclosure does not come from a legal basis but relies on administrative orders, leading to a general lack of legal support for Chinese government information disclosure.

2.3 Information Economy Perspective

In the big data environment, the number of government information resources has increased dramatically, types and spatial and temporal breadth broadening, and the sharing of information resources for the whole society has become a reality, which urgently requires government websites to put the construction goal of data opening on the agenda, consequently "data opening" has gradually become one of the research focuses of the academic community. As early as 2008, Jiang Yongfu has proposed that the government should regard open information resources as non-monopoly quasi-public products. And in 2009, Chen Yazhi et al. also proposed the urgency of raw data disclosure and the development and utilization of government open information resources. Hu Xiaoming further demonstrates that an important function of government data opening is to enable the accumulated data resources of the government to be better reused, which is also the fundamental service purpose of government information opening expects[8].

As a result, the government's public information has also become an important information resource, especially the raw data involved in a large amount of government work. Yet Raw data is more authentic and has a broader use-value, but it is also more difficult to disclose and use[9]. Due to the institutional deficiency in data disclosure, the Chinese government's data disclosure remains in the initial stage, with a gap between that of developed countries to be further fulfilled[10].

Moreover, a daunting technical gulf lies between the opening of government data and the benefit to the general public. Unlike citizens' inquiries about individual data in the context of government information disclosure, the utilization of large-scale data resources necessarily calls for sufficient data processing technology, including statistical and analytical capabilities, structural classification storage and automation capabilities, and exchange and sharing capabilities, [11] which most public individuals lack. Therefore, while promoting the opening of government data, it is necessary to further enhance the ability of government websites to disclose information, i.e., the ability of government data to directly serve the public.

2.4 Internet Technology Perspective

In 2014, the Chinese Communist Party proposed that the electronification of government affairs must be promoted and the construction of Internet government information and data service platforms and people-friendly service platforms strengthened. This means that the public's initiative in various aspects of the government information disclosure process has increased, i.e., from symbolic to substantive participation.[12]

In the early years, the construction of Chinese government websites has not yet established a public-centered idea, instead, it is government-centered and convenient for management purposes. In terms of website content design and board organization, most of them are arranged according to the division of responsibilities, authority, and order of government departments, or the content of services provided by government departments. It is far from integrating e-government resources, instead only building simple applications above isolated content management, and having a low degree of interaction with other systems covered by e-government.[13]

Online service capability is the core capability of government websites and is a reflection of the service purpose of government websites.[14] To make sure information disclosure serves the public directly, it is also necessary to continuously improve the online service capability. Currently, the construction of Chinese government websites and the depth and standardization of information services still have a large upside to seize, and the information presentation methods and retrieval functions to be optimized. These all require reliable legal supervision and institutional protection.

3. Targeted research

This type of research is based on field research and specific analysis of a specific aspect of government website building practices and results in detailed and targeted recommendations.

3.1 For a specific element in the practice

(1) government responsiveness. The concept of government responsiveness, which requires the government to carry out public management and provide public services, is studied by many researchers.

In the process of conducting public management and providing public services, the government is expected to actively and sensitively respond to the demands of the social public and takes corresponding measures.[15] The current responsiveness of the government website exists poor targeting, and selective response, with problems such as shallow response content.

(2) One-stop service capability. Some researchers explore the service capacity of centralized one-time provision and integrated processing, proposing that providing one-stop services for citizens is the ideal state of e-government construction, integrating the transformation of government functions, organizational restructuring, government process re-engineering and construction of e-government systems, and introduces a model of one-stop government.[16]

(3) The evaluation of government websites. Government website evaluation is becoming an important means to promote the development of e-government and researches domestic and worldwide evaluation methods and evaluation index systems of government websites[17]. The system quality of public websites and the quality of the information and services they provide are important indicators of government public service capability. The research on the evaluation model of government websites has become an important indicator for other studies.[18]

3.2 For a specific local government

This type of research is a further study of the research on a particular level of government websites mentioned in the previous section, in which the unique situation and problems in the construction and operation of the research object are combined with that of government websites at the same level, eventually proposing feasible improvement measures for the research object.

4. Research on foreign countries

Compared with developed countries, China's government website information disclosure relatively falls behind, which is also reflected in the construction and operation of government websites. Summarizing the research on foreign government information disclosure models and the current practice of foreign government websites has certain reference value for exploring the model of government websites in China. Therefore, many researchers also focus on the construction of foreign government websites to present implications in the context of Chinese conditions.

4.1 Research on foreign theories

The research on government information disclosure by foreign researchers has gradually emerged along with the development of a modern democratic system and information society. In addition to the same attention to the innovation of the government information disclosure model as that in China, foreign studies focus on the construction of a citizen-oriented network service model to enhance the effectiveness of public services.[19] Foreign researchers also focus on some topics that are relatively less mentioned in China, such as the training of the recipients of information disclosure, i.e., the public's ability to receive information and corresponding publicity work, the logic of the operation of information disclosure authority within administrative agencies, the issue of government information disclosure and the protection of sensitive and confidential information, etc.[20]

There is also a lot of research on the networking of government information disclosure and the construction of government websites. The focus of the construction of government websites in foreign countries shows in three major aspects: improving the quality of the content of government information resources, integrating and sharing government information resources, and focusing on user needs through research on the overall planning of the digital government in each country.[21] Many foreign researchers are discussing the construction of national government websites in juxtaposition with the development goals of national digital government programs. For instance, some researchers discuss the U.S. government's information dissemination and storage digitization program and use it as a framework to analyze the level of access to U.S. federal government websites and the reasons for it.[22] Some studies also illustrated the current situation and reasons for the inconsistency between the Canadian government's Access to Information Act and the information provided by the government website, which has led to a significant reduction in the results of the practice.

4.2 Research on foreign practices

(1) Website structure. Zhao Junxiang analyzes the experience of US government website construction and explains some of its features such as humanization, internationalization, openness, transparency, and strong inter-connectivity, summarizes the advantages of US government website such as strong information management coordination, rich electronic database resources, and convenient online search and access to resources, proposing that it is necessary to further enhance the awareness and ability of comprehensive services on the existing basis in China.

(2) Supporting system. Wang Pei et al. mention that government information disclosure in the US has a mature and well-established legal system guarantee. The information disclosure of the US government is carried out by various agencies following the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act and the Paperwork Reduction Act. At the same time, the US government has established a government information distribution index system according to the provisions of the Paperwork Reduction Act to provide a convenient way for the public to obtain government information; the Government Information Resources Management provides regulations for the federal government to adopt a unified standard format, standardize the process, and define the principles of information confidentiality and disclosure in strict accordance with legislative norms, which provides an institutional guarantee for the standardization of its government website.

(3) Open data. In 2009, the US government creatively introduced the concept of "big data" into the public administration field by releasing the Open Government Directive and launching the "Data.gov" public data open website. Chen Mei analyzed the protection and regulation mechanism, cooperation mechanism, and policy implementation mechanism of the US government in data disclosure, and proposed the development direction in the light of China's national conditions. Qin Jing et al. also compared and analyzed the current situation of government data openness in China and that of the US, suggesting that there are still gaps in the breadth, depth, interface humanization, and dynamism of data openness in China, advocating that Chinese government should continue to open up data.

5. Conclusion

Information disclosure on government websites is not only a simple branch of government information disclosure carrier but also an important issue in government website construction, e-government, and even public services, which largely reflects the echo of national policies as well as includes the realization of government service effectiveness. The research on information disclosure on government websites in China also shows the characteristics of integration, with both macro and micro views, common and individual summaries, spanning various disciplines, local regions, and institutions and departments. However, the current research is still scattered and lacks a theoretical system of information disclosure on government websites with Chinese characteristics that can be adapted to local conditions. It is still necessary for researchers to synthesize the existing domestic and foreign study and practice, and conduct further in-depth research on Chinese information disclosure on government websites, to provide theoretical support for promoting the practical process.

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