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Developing Public Access to Information about the NY State Legislature

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Political Science 122 – State and Local Government

1. The sheer quantity of information about/produced by the NY State Legislature is overwhelming. It needs to be organized and presented clearly and logically. Otherwise it would be like piling all the books in State Library in the middle of the Egg and inviting people to check them out.
2. Organizing information and making it accessible to the public is the role of a professional librarian, or as they are known today, information scientists. Many of these librarians are also highly savvy about the use of and creation of online information resources. Besides, freedom of access to information is the holy grail of most professional librarians.
3. To make information about the State Legislature and the legislative process most usable, it should be presented in layers, starting with the simplest, least complex information, followed by clickable and increasingly in depth layers. In fact, proposed legislation making its way through the legislative process should be indexed and abstracted (also information science skills), unless, of course, bills are already abstracted by their authors.

Indexing the bills, which means summing them up with 10 – 15 key words, would improve online searching of their content. The search engine should be able to do searches on indexed words and free text searching simultaneously.

Although somewhat sensitive and a bit of a judgment call, bills could be indexed in terms of the population groups, geographical or otherwise, on whom the bill might have the greatest impact. i.e., preschool children, undocumented workers, urban dwellers, etc.

4. To provide a context for a bill passing through the legislative process, the website should provide information about the process that would also be clickable to increasingly in depth information. This would include information about the committee structure and who is on the committees.

5. Statements by legislators about the bill should be accepted from any legislator that wants to make them and be readily available to anyone searching for a particular bill. Links to other organizations that have positions on particular bills and major media discussion should also be provided. Discussions of major bills might also include a moderated blog.
6. Information about every legislator, including contact information, voting record, source of campaign contributions, and a profile of the interests of the district he/she represents should also be included.
7. Information about how to join or form a citizen's action group.
8. After the website has been established, hire a public relations/public education person to promote the use of the website to high school government teachers and the media. This person should also attend pertinent conferences to make presentations and get feedback about the website content; ie, conferences of the NY State League of Women Voters.
9. Develop an email list of newspapers and send press releases based on the content of the website, to these papers. Such releases might be particularly useful to weekly newspapers that don't have any budget for this type of news. News released should be streamlined, easy to read, and tailored to the needs of papers serving populations that might be affected by the legislation. IE, don't send releases about bills that impact the dairy industry to Buffalo area newspapers.
10. Getting the resources for such a project:

Bring together leaders from a variety of sources, including the legislature, to get ideas, momentum and enthusiasm. The Department of Information Studies at SUNY Albany might be a good place to start. One of the five missions of the Department is to "promote the development of public information policies that support a broadly diverse, informed, and responsible citizenship." The head of the department is Terry Maxwell, who has his PhD in public administration, two decades of experience in government information management, and "serves as the research director for U Albany's Intergovernmental Studies Program." (Of course he might be out of touch with the needs of the everyday citizen, but one has to start somewhere.)

11. If it appears that an information agency connected too closely with the legislature would not serve the purpose of providing accurate, up to date information, consider seeking private funding for this purpose or establish a quasi-governmental agency.