WORLD LIBRARY
AND INFORMATION
CONGRESS:
78TH IFLA GENERAL
CONFERENCE
AND ASSEMBLY

IFLA
2012 Helsinki

LIBRARIES NOW!
INSPIRING
SURPRISING
EMPOWERING

Easy law: democratizing access to legislation

Soledad Ferreiro
Director, Chilean Library of Congress
Santiago, Chile

Abstract:

Democracy relies on citizen participation. The ability to exercise rights and participate as equals in society however, requires understanding. Throughout its history the Chilean Library of Congress has developed different services and products aimed at making laws easier to access and understand. In order to remove language barriers to participation in 2003 the Chilean Library of Congress developed a program named "Easy Law", an initiative that makes laws easy to understand. Through "Easy Law" citizens access laws in a simple, clear and direct language.The programme has been designed in different formats, answering the specific characteristics of our diverse audiences, such as the visually impaired, indigenous communities, and the different styles of understanding text. This experience provides a successful example of how Libraries can provide useful resources that engage citizens.

Background

In order to exercise democracy, grasping the impact of the law on citizens and public institutions is key, not only to make use of one´s rights, but also to assess institutions in regards to the fulfillment of their commitments. On the other hand, legal language and the framework of the law are difficult to understand by a layman, with the resulting risk that citizens may not be able to perceive their value and even less likely apply and comply with them.

The Chilean Library of Congress (BCN), focuses on two audiences: Members of Parliament (MPs), advisors and parliamentary staff, and citizens. The Library makes sure that its

services provide a good user experience, considering the differences between the diverse communities it serves.

Created in 1883, the history of BCN is shaped by a strong dedication to public service, taking care that people understand laws easily and making sure that products and services are accessible to all. Already in 1960 a law enquiry service existed that answered questions both over the telephone and in person. In the last 25 year, significant events reconfigured the essence of the Library with the arrival in 1985 of the national legal database, after which the Chilean Library of Congress takes over the responsibility of its maintenance, updating and digital access. On the other hand, in 2006 it starts the large scale provision of advisory services for Committees and MPs and maintains one of the most used websites in Chile with 12 million visits, 31 million web pages views and 9.3 unique visitors in 2011. Although there has been great advances, citizens do not have a positive image of Congress and it has been proved that their good user experience with the Library´s services does not influence their perceived image of Senate and Chamber of Deputies.

In 2003 to tackle this dissociation between citizens and Congress, the Library begins the incremental publication, in different formats responding to its diverse audiences, of law summaries, basic facts and legal questions and answers using simple language.

Additionally BCN is not free from the responsibility to transmit the new user experiences available due to the technological changes that allow for use and reuse information freely. This idea promoted by the Internet´s creator, Sir Tim Berners, who from the W3 Consortium is generating new standards and practices in the use of digital objects in all its expressions. One example of this, can be seen with the changes to the national legal database, which since its computerization in the 80s using an IBM STAIRS system, was migrated to a client-server system based on BASIS PLUS by OpenText in the 90s and from 2008 is housed in a XML Oracle database accessible at www.leychile.cl. Expanding and democratizing access includes making data open, for example all Chilean legislation and MPs biographical information from 1811 to date. Hence today Chilean legislation is available as open linked data (datos.bcn.cl), retrievable with machines or attractive visualizations.

Hence, although multiple complexities arise from the new standards and practices, the challenges ahead point towards generating empowered audiences who can enrich and link information that today is not connected, based on their knowledge.

Easy Law Programme

The Programme is born for the view the Library has of its mission and the way in which it develops and offers its products and services: To always be an agent that expands and facilitates citizen access. This applies to the Easy Law Programme, but also to the Library's diverse web expressions or the Delibera Tournament that invites young people to experience legislative work.

The aim of the programme of Easy Law is that though clear and accessible language citizens can understand laws and feel comfortable, trusting the legal certainty that comes from Congress and be sure that when exercising their rights, Congress is there for them, answering their questions, with MPs that support them.

Easy Law currently offers 896 digital objects available at www.bcn.cl in different formats, diverse media and channels of distribution. For citizens "Legal Guides" are available in text, audio (podcast) in Spanish and Mapudungun, Aymara, Quechua and Rapanui, our most

spoken indigenous languages, "Basic Records" in a structured format and downloadable PDF in Spanish and all other 4 mentioned languages, "Law Summaries" in text and Dramatizations in video with dialogues in Mapudungun when dealing with aspects of Law particularly important for indigenous communities.

For Members we produce "Brochures" for the most important laws in a question and answer format, which they can download from the Library´s MPs only site and personalize for constituency use. Additionally audio versions are distributed by Members to community radios.

Development

Easy Law is born from the concern of both MPs and Congress staff regarding the difficulties citizens have in understanding legal terminology, developing gradually based on the successful adoption of each of its new products by citizens. Today we conceive a programme in constant evolution that will serve as a channel on our new website from 2013.

From the 1940s, the Chilean Library of Congress, following its diverse Directors has had a special sensitivity expressed in its different services, to help people understand the Law and the legislative process. Among them a question and answer service in the Library or over the phone, which was upgraded with the arrival of E-mail, carried out by specialised reference librarians. The drive to develop a Library website in 2004 that acts as a public meeting square, opened up new ways of relating to our audiences, which resulted in the following chronology of events:

2004: 156 "Guide to Frequent Questions", today Legal Guides, have been published on www.bcn.cl , focused on the action that will be carried out by citizens. A law or various laws relating to a subject are explained through questions. What needs to be known, what is going to change, where they must go and which documents they must have to exercise their rights are all outlined. Laws suggested by MPs or those that imply a major impact for citizens are selected, such as those dealing with consumer rights, defence, human rights, disability, education, family, taxes, justice, environment, health and social security among others. These can be printed or sent by email directly from our webpage.

2006: BCN created the first " Brochure Template" to be used by MPs, designed to be reproduced and distributed among their voters. This digital template of a Law, contains illustrations and text in an easy language, leaving a space so that the MP can include his picture and information regarding his political party and is available only for Member use. They have an attractive and didactic design that reinforces the main messages. As a result one template created by BCN can be used by the 158 MPs. Today there are 148 templates available.

2007: "Law Summaries", in which the main aspects that affect citizens are highlighted keeping a partially legal language. To date 311 laws have been published in this format on the web.

2008: "Law Dramatizations", to this day there are 116 audio recordings and podcasts, in which colloquial language is used to explain the most fundamental aspects of a Law. This new incursion from the written text to an audio format opened up many possibilities for the visually impaired and also for their use by community radios. In 2 to 2, 5 minutes a story is told that reveals the most relevant or less known elements of a Law. A format of radio theatre is used to make listening more fun and the information given more illustrative.

Dramatizations are available on the BCN website, on the Chamber of Deputies radio and on www.podcaster.cl, a Chilean podcast site. They can be listened to and downloaded on-line.

2009: A new initiative to bring the Law to Mapuche communities and the lack of consensus regarding grammar in written Mapudungun, led us to the dramatizations in video format. These "Videos with dramatizations of Laws" are carried out by young Mapuche actors who express themselves in Mapudungun and whenever words are missing in Spanish. Of the 16 videos created, only 11 are still valid.

2010: 129 "Guides to Frequent Questions" in audio and 78 "Basic Records" in text. Read question and answers are developed for people with some grade of visual impairment. Basic Records are illustrated and are downloadable or printable in PDF format. They include a short story that illustrates in what aspect of everyday life this particular Law applies. To date 156 Legal Guides are available.

2011: "Legal Guides" in indigenous languages both in text and audio. Within the "Multicultural Easy Law" initiative, these 10 legal guides of frequent questions were translated into the four most established indigenous language in Chile. Together with downlaodable MP3 and podcast audio versions that can be broadcasted on community, comercial and university radios, they are also available as printable Basic Records that can be distributed during events and activities.

In summary all objects are digital and retrievable via our website with content being presenting in four different formats: text, audio/podcast, video and brochure templates (MPs only). The text document may be PDF or web-based, in Spanish or in an indigenous language. The audio is either MP3 or direct recording, dialogues or monologues in Spanish or indigenous language. Video are dramatizations are outlined above.

Citizens have access to all these Easy Law products on our website www.bcn.cl, except brochures that are distributed only among Members.

Accessibility, a constant promise

Multicultural Easy Law: Designed to contribute to the empowerment of the different indigenous communities through the knowledge of legal content that enhances the notion of full citizenship and highlights the importance of indigenous languages in the public sphere. This is a specific strategy by BCN to answer the need for "equal access to the law" by indigenous communities, which led to the growth of the Easy Law Programme. In some cases, different interpretations of what constitutes the valid written text and how it should be translated makes the development of these services a complex task. Hence this initiative counted on the participation of civil society, academia and other actors. During a pilot project, text and audio were translated and printable records of 10 Legal Guides were developed for the four selected indigenous languages.

Visual Impairment: From 2011 we have a selection of Legal Guides available in audio for the visually impaired that meets the standards defined by the WAI (Web Accesibility Initiative) and can be accessed through our main BCN webpage http://www.bcn.cl/guias/discapacidad_visual/index_html.

Additionally through a banner on their webpage, other institutions such as the National Service for the Disabled (SENADIS), the Central Library for the Blind Foundation and the Corporation for the Blind, give access to this content.

Technological Command of Audiences: Due to the high level of Internet penetration in Chile, we decided to develop Widgets, in other words programmes on certain topics available within the Library, especially Easy Law. For this purpose "Llévatelo" (literally "Take it") http://llevatelo.bcn.cl/Widget was created that allows any citizen or community to integrate Easy Law content onto their website or information agregator (RSS).

At the same time efforts were made to make sure the "Basic Record" was easy to download and print for those users interested in a paper version.

Easy Law in Practice: Delibera, the school tournament that promotes civic education for high school students, encourages the understanding of the legislative process through the hands-on experience of being an MP. The knowledge and understanding of a Member's role, legislation and current bills is acquired though a fun experience where different teams compete by creating bills based on the worries and aspirations of young people.

Conversion of legal to citizen text: Considering accessibility BCN has ensured that various of its programmes and products such as "Citizen Tribune" or "Bills Digest" use easy to understand language. The legislative debate and recently passed laws, become web articles for citizen use, where direct and simple language is a must.

Impact

According to Google Analytics, during 2011 Easy Law received 1 million 900 thousand visits, representing 26% of all the Library´s web traffic. In total 2 million 400 thousand Easy Law pages were viewed. The average time spent on the site was 3:40 minutes and the most viewed topics were driving license, alimony and traffic law. The visits to the Easy Law section have increased from year to year: 112 thousand visitors in 2007, increased to 543 thousand in 2008 (+381%), 951 thousant in 2009 (+75%), 1.356 million in 2010 and 1.824 million in 2011 (+35%). In the first four months of 2012 it has received 621 thousand visitors, 20 % more than during the same period last year.

Request for brochure templates on behalf of MPs have also increased to a total of 199. Additionally we have reached over one thousand monthly podcast downloads from www.bcn.cl and in the last year community and regional radios have carried out 80 downloads from the Chamber of Deputies Radio, allowing for broadcast and distribution around the country.

The Easy Law Programme has also received an acknowledgement by the Interamerican Development Bank (IADB), as a successful experience of its regional technical cooperation programme "Connected Parliaments: The Impact of New Technologies in the Transformation of the Legislative Branch". The IADB requested information on Easy Law to include in its knowledge bank and best practice repository on lessons learned on the impact of new technologies on Latin American Parliaments.