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Right to information

By **Mark Boyd**

Junar user, freelance writer based in Barcelona, who specializes in using data to tell stories and share information.

Two international human rights organizations have recently published a report ranking the world's right to information laws. [Access Info Europe](#) and the Centre for Law and Democracy are dedicated to ensuring citizens have open access to data and information from public authorities. In their surprise research findings, it is the member states of the

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European Union that fall way behind other countries in enabling citizens to easily access public data and government information.

89 countries were assessed in the study. Researchers scored each nation's right to information laws using 7 indicators. These indicators assess how well the laws define rights to information access, how complicated the processes are when requesting information, what information authorities can refuse to provide, how citizens and community groups can appeal, and other elements.

In the Right to Information Ranking Study, the total score for each country reflects the strength of citizen rights in accessing data and documents held by public authorities. Key findings included:

- The more recent the law, the greater the likelihood that it details better information rights for citizens.
- This meant laws in Serbia, India, Slovenia and other countries who have updated their right to information laws since 2000 scored the highest results.
- 15 of the bottom 20 scoring nations were European member states which have more antiquated legislation.
- Junar's home country of Chile, which introduced right to information laws in 2008, scored 93 out of 150 – falling behind 4 nations in the Americas that scored above 100 and coming in 7th among all nations in the Americas.

Helen Darbshire, Executive Director of Access Info Europe, spoke to Junar in between attending sessions at the International Conference of Information Commissioners currently being held in Ottawa, Canada. She explained how data advocates who use Junar to manage their data can make use of the research. In particular, she pointed to the detailed excel data available for each country that shows individual nation's scores for each of the 7 indicators:

“We hope that [individuals and communities] will use the data in advocacy in their countries. One of the strengths of the research is being able to take a particular indicator and compare across the 89 countries. So, for example, if a country is planning to introduce fees for filing requests, it can be demonstrated that this is very rarely done (Canada, Ireland, India – that's about it). And we hope that

Ireland and Canada will see sense to abolish fees using this comparative information.”

Ms Darbshire encouraged Junar users to mine the data to make local comparisons and advocate for better right to information laws. “Some nice data visualisations showing how a country lags behind its neighbours on a specific indicator should be useful for advocacy work,” she suggested.

One effort to use the results to improve access to data has already emerged. The findings demonstrated that many European nations need to update their right to information legislation to reflect contemporary standards for access to data and government documents. Access Info Europe has followed up the findings with a new advocacy push and web portal, “AsktheEU.org” which aims to document Europe’s openness and responsiveness to new information requests. At present, the human rights group estimates only 0.0024% of Europeans (or 12,000 of the 500 million residents) are exercising their right to access public documents and data.

Access to information is seen as fundamental to human rights and the availability of open government data is increasingly essential for political transparency and economic development in societies around the globe.

The robust methodology of the research project involved scoring each nation’s legislation against the seven key indicators that measure rights of local citizens to access government information. This was then followed by a process of double-checking the scores with a leading expert in each nation, and finally by rigorous independent assessment of the results by a global Advisory Council committed to international standards on the right to information.

The study could only assess legislative rights to information and has not been able – at this stage – to measure how well governments implement their laws. It is hoped that a new body growing out of this agenda – the Open Government Partnership – will be able to focus more closely on how well countries implement right to information laws and how well they respond to individual requests for access to data.

How well does your nation rank in the right to information debate? Have you needed access to data from public authorities? Review the Junar dashboard on World Rankings of Right to Information and share your thoughts with us.

Country	Date	1: Right	2:
Albania	1999	2	
Angola	2002	4	
Antigua and Barbuda*	2004	3	
Armenia	2003	3	
Australia	1982	2	

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