

Bridging the Gap: How Public Libraries are Empowering Communities through E-Governance Information Services

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Abstract

Purpose: This article aims to examine the role of public libraries in empowering communities through e-governance information services. It aims to explore the various services offered by public libraries, the benefits they provide to communities in bridging the digital divide, and the challenges they face in delivering these services.

Design/methodology/approach: The article utilises a descriptive and analytical approach. It combines a literature review of existing studies, reports, and relevant sources to gather information on the emergence of e-governance, the role of public libraries, and the challenges they encounter.

Findings: The article discusses the services provided by public libraries, such as online resources, computer access, and digital literacy training, and demonstrates how these services have empowered communities by bridging the digital divide. It highlights the positive impact of e-governance information services on enabling citizens to access government services and information online.

Research Limitations: The article has certain limitations, such as the availability of data or studies on the topic, potential biases in the sources consulted, or the generalizability of findings to different regions or contexts. It also recognises that the rapidly evolving nature of technology and e-governance poses challenges in capturing the most up-to-date information and trends.

Practical Implications: The article likely explores the practical implications of the findings for policymakers, library administrators, and community stakeholders. It may suggest strategies for improving and expanding e-governance information services in public libraries, such as increasing funding, enhancing infrastructure, and providing additional staff training. The article may also emphasise the importance of collaboration between libraries, government agencies, and community organisations to maximise the impact of e-governance initiatives.

Originality/Value: The originality of the article lies in its focus on the specific role of public libraries in empowering communities through e-governance information services. While e-governance and the digital divide have been studied before, this article contributes by highlighting the unique position of public libraries as key players in addressing these challenges.

Keywords: E-governance, Public Libraries, Community Information Services, Digital Divide, Online Resources, Digital Literacy, Community Empowerment, Digital Age.

Article Type: Descriptive.

1. Introduction: According to the World Bank, e-government refers to the use of information technologies by government agencies to transform their relationships with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. E-government aims to improve the delivery of government services, promote citizen empowerment through access to information, and enhance government management. On the other hand, e-government involves the use of ICTs by the public sector to promote transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in the decision-making process. This approach can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the public sector while also supporting the values of openness,

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transparency, and public access to information. However, the benefits of e-governance are not equally distributed across all communities, as the digital divide continues to persist. Many individuals and communities, particularly those in low-income or rural areas, lack access to the necessary technology and resources to fully participate in the digital age. Public libraries have emerged as crucial players in bridging this gap, providing communities with access to technology and information through their e-governance information services. By offering online resources, computer access, and digital literacy training, public libraries have become a vital source of support for individuals and communities seeking to overcome the digital divide and access critical government services.

2. Literature Review: This literature review covers a range of topics related to information technology and its impact on public sector tasks and governance. Schuppan (2022) notes that traditional outsourcing approaches are losing relevance, and their place is being taken by new technologies that enable novel forms of work-sharing. Khanchandani (2022) highlights the role of public libraries in achieving digital goals, while Gumzej (2021) discusses the challenges of processing and securing the vast amounts of information generated by these technologies. Parkhurst et al. (2015) note the complex relationships that tribal governments have with other levels of government, while Nogrsek and Vintar (2015) explore the organisational transformations required to make e-government a success. Rahman (2013) discusses the theoretical assumptions underlying e-government and the potential role of public libraries as service providers, particularly in India. Li and Lin (2012) argue that e-government is essential for effective public management but note that government leaders need to improve their media literacy skills to make the most of these technologies. Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes (2010) examine the impact of e-government and social media on cultural attitudes about transparency, while Bertot, Jaeger, and McClure (2008) explore how e-government can improve government services and delivery systems. Monga (2008) analyses the experiences of local, state, and federal governments in India, highlighting the transformative impact of e-governance on service delivery. Paul (2007) notes the global recognition of the importance of information and communication technologies in governance and presents research on the National Capital Territory of the Delhi government.

3. Objectives: The objectives of the study are to

- a) Investigate the role of public libraries in providing e-governance information services to communities.
- b) Assess the impact of e-governance information services provided by public libraries on the communities they serve.
- c) Identify the challenges faced by public libraries in providing e-governance information services and suggest ways to overcome them.
- d) Propose recommendations for policymakers, library administrators, and community stakeholders to enhance the effectiveness of e-governance information services provided by public libraries.

4. Methodology: The research design for this study will be qualitative, specifically a literature review. To collect data, an extensive review of academic literature on the role of public libraries in bridging the digital divide will be conducted. The literature search will focus on reputable academic databases, such as JSTOR, EBSCO, and ProQuest, using key search terms including “digital divide,” “e-governance,” and “access to information”. Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the collected data, with themes identified based on the research questions and objectives.

5. E-Government: E-governance can be defined as the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to transform and improve the delivery of public services, promote transparency and accountability, enhance citizen participation, and enable better decision-making processes in government. It involves the seamless integration of digital technologies into all aspects of governance, including policy-making, planning, service delivery, and public engagement, to enhance the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the government.

The growth of e-government in India has been significant since the introduction of the National E-Governance Plan (NeGP) in 2006. However, despite the government's investment of approximately INR 1 lakh crore in the digital India programme in 2014, the adoption of public services by Indian citizens has not been as successful as expected. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of digital services and forced government agencies to accelerate their efforts to provide online services. As the economy begins to reopen, the reality of the new digital world is becoming more apparent. The challenge for the Indian government is to ensure that all citizens have access to and can effectively utilise e-government services, especially in remote and underserved areas.

5.1 Types of Interaction in E-Governance: Several types of interaction can occur in e-governance, including:

a) *Government-to-Citizen (G2C):* This type of interaction involves the government providing services to citizens through digital channels. Examples include online portals for paying taxes, applying for passports, or accessing healthcare services.

b) *Government-to-Business (G2B):* This type of interaction involves the government providing services to businesses through digital channels. Examples include online portals for business registration, tax filing, and licencing.

c) *Government-to-Government (G2G):* This type of interaction involves the government providing services to other government agencies through digital channels. Examples include electronic procurement systems, inter-agency data sharing, and collaboration tools.

d) *Citizen-to-Government (C2G):* This type of interaction involves citizens interacting with the government through digital channels. Examples include submitting feedback, complaints, or requests for information.

e) *Business-to-Government (B2G):* This type of interaction involves businesses interacting with the government through digital channels. Examples include bidding for government contracts, submitting regulatory reports, or accessing government data.

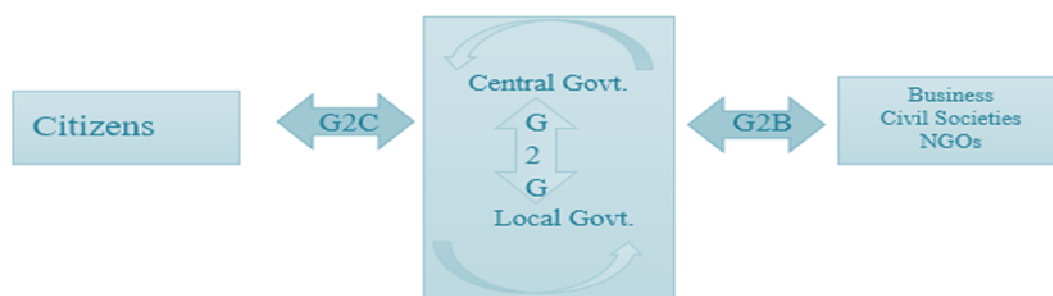


Fig.1 Flow Chart: Various Interactions of E-Governance

6. Community Information Services via E-Governance: E-governance in India has come a long way from the computerization of government departments to citizen-centric, service-oriented, and transparent initiatives. Continuous efforts have been made at various levels to enhance the delivery of public services and simplify the process of accessing them. E-governance aims to maintain communication with authorities in villages, blocks, tehsils,

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districts, and cities. Public libraries can play a crucial role in promoting e-governance, particularly in remote and rural areas. The ultimate goal of e-governance is to provide citizens with public services conveniently and effectively, as stated in the National e-Governance Plan's (NeGP) vision statement. The NeGP takes a comprehensive approach to e-governance initiatives across the country, incorporating them into a shared vision. A vast infrastructure is being developed nationwide, extending to even the most remote villages, with extensive record digitization for easy and reliable internet access. Mission Mode Projects (MMPs) are initiatives under the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) that aim to provide online services to citizens through various government departments. The MMPs are classified into three categories: central MMPs, state MMPs, and integrated MMPs.

Table-1: Existing/ongoing Projects in the Mission Mode Projects

| Mission Mode Projects (MMP) | | |
|--|---|--|
| Central MMPs | State MMPs | Integrated MMPs |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Banking 2. Central Excise & Customs 3. Income Tax (IT) 4. Insurance 5. MCA21 6. Passport 7. Immigration, Visa and Foreigners Registration & Tracking 8. Pension 9. e-Office 10. Posts 11. UID | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Agriculture 2. Commercial Taxes 3. e-District 4. Employment Exchange 5. Land Records(NLRMP) 6. Municipalities 7. e-Panchayats 8. Police(CCTNS) 9. Road Transport 10. Treasuries Computerization 11. PDS 12. Education 13. Health | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CSC 2. e-Biz 3. e-Courts 4. e-Procurement 5. EDI for eTrade 6. National e-governance Service Delivery Gateway 7. India Portal |

(Source: <https://www.meity.gov.in>)

Other Projects & Initiatives-

- CSC 2.0-A way Forward
- Digitize India Platform (DIP)
- National Information Infrastructure (NII)
- PayGov India – National Payment Service platform
- Centre for e-governance
- E-Governance Conformity Assessment Centre
- Open Technology Centre
- India Development Gateway
- World Bank assisted projects
- e-Pramaan
- New Awareness and Communication Scheme
- e-Gov AppStore
- Accessibility

7. Role of Public Libraries in the E-Governance Era: Libraries have traditionally focused on managing physical resources such as books, manuscripts, and journals, as well as providing services like circulation, subject specialisation, and user education. They have also been responsible for managing staff, budgets, organising events, and addressing information queries. However, in recent times, libraries have expanded their role to become providers of information resources and services that are not limited to physical buildings. This shift has

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necessitated that librarians acquire new skills and keep improving their existing ones to keep up with the changes brought about by technology. Public libraries play a vital role in providing e-governance information services to communities by serving as a bridge between the government and the public. They provide access to government information and services, offer digital literacy programmes to help individuals develop the necessary skills to use technology effectively, promote civic engagement, and partner with government agencies to provide access to government information and services. Public libraries are uniquely positioned to provide e-governance information services to communities, helping to empower individuals to participate in civic life.

8. Roll of Librarians: The role of a librarian has evolved in recent times, with a shift towards providing information resources and services beyond the traditional library setting. Along with the previous tasks of researching and implementing information management techniques, conducting regular database updates, and managing library inventory, librarians now have new responsibilities, such as:

- a) Handling patron requests and answering questions via phone or email
- b) Promoting information literacy skills to patrons
- c) Creating and updating website content
- d) Browsing the web to curate relevant resources for patrons
- e) Managing digital repositories for archival purposes
- f) Preserving electronic data for future use

9. Challenges Faced by the Libraries: Libraries face various challenges in implementing e-governance initiatives, including the digital divide, lack of infrastructure, cyber security concerns, resistance to change, privacy issues, language barriers, cost, and digital literacy. Libraries must address these challenges by investing in digital infrastructure, cyber security measures, and digital literacy training programmes to ensure that their patrons have access to the necessary resources and skills to use e-governance services effectively. Additionally, libraries should work to provide e-governance services in multiple languages to reach all members of the community, and officials should be encouraged to adopt new technologies to facilitate the implementation of these initiatives. Libraries may face financial constraints in implementing e-governance projects and may need to collaborate with other organisations and government bodies to secure funding. Libraries must implement robust data protection policies to safeguard the privacy of their patrons' personal information and ensure their trust in e-governance services.

10. Recommendations: Based on the importance of e-governance and the role of public libraries in providing access to e-governance information services, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers, library administrators, and community stakeholders to enhance their effectiveness:

- a) **Increase funding for e-governance initiatives:** Policymakers and government authorities should allocate more resources and funding for e-governance initiatives in public libraries to improve the quality of services provided to the community. This can be achieved through grants, sponsorships, and partnerships with private organisations.
- b) **Develop training programmes:** Library administrators should develop training programmes for librarians and staff to enhance their understanding of e-governance services and related technologies.
- c) **Create awareness campaigns:** Community stakeholders should engage in awareness campaigns to promote e-governance services offered by public libraries. This can include organising workshops, seminars, and information sessions to educate people on the benefits of e-governance services and how they can access them through their local libraries.

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d) Improve accessibility: Libraries should ensure that e-governance services are easily accessible to all members of the community, regardless of their location, language, or ability. This can be achieved by providing multilingual resources, assistive technologies, and outreach programs to underserved populations.

e) Collaborate with government agencies: Public libraries should collaborate with government agencies and other stakeholders to improve the availability and quality of e-governance services. This can include sharing resources and expertise, co-creating programmes and services, and developing partnerships to expand the reach of e-governance services.

f) Measure and evaluate outcomes: Policymakers and library administrators should measure and evaluate the outcomes of e-governance services provided by public libraries to ensure that they are effective and meet the needs of the community. This can include gathering user feedback, tracking usage statistics, and conducting surveys to assess user satisfaction.

11. Conclusion: E-governance is a crucial way to improve the efficiency and transparency of government administration. While there are challenges to its implementation, such as the digital divide, lack of infrastructure, and cyber security concerns, governments must invest in digital literacy training programmes, cyber security measures, and data protection policies to overcome these obstacles. In the context of libraries, they can play a crucial role in bridging the digital divide and providing access to information to all, especially in rural and remote locations. To make e-governance more effective and citizen-centric, there needs to be a change in the mindset of service providers, consultations between service providers and seekers, computerization of services, compensation for delays and rewards for performance, and measures to eradicate corruption. The government has made efforts to bridge the digital divide, but more needs to be done to improve the infrastructure of public libraries and link them with community information centers. By doing so, libraries and information centres can play a critical role in reducing the gap between those with access to digital information and those without access.

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