

# Indispensable Institutions: Making a Case for Public Libraries as Local E-Government Service Administrators

by A. J. Million

## EDITOR'S SUMMARY

While electronic access to government information is an expressed goal, implementation varies widely by locality, purpose and focus. Public libraries are uniquely situated to serve e-government administration by assembling and managing online collections of local electronic government records. Materials to be collected should reflect local and patron needs, be permitted by law and be accessible online. Libraries already provide internet access and reference support, and they are increasingly serving as intermediaries as agencies cut staffing as they move materials online. Libraries promote transparency, in strong demand by the public and necessary for citizen participation in the democratic process. Libraries are trusted institutions, and, supported by librarians' competencies, they enable access, digital preservation and support for online collections. Numerous public and private libraries serve as depositories of state and federal government records, providing access points for citizens to obtain information. With the foundation of skills, capabilities and precedents, it would not be difficult for public libraries to expand on their tradition of managing and supporting access to information to administer online collections of local government information.

## KEYWORDS

electronic government  
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public libraries

access to resources  
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In the United States public libraries facilitate the use of e-government services by providing reference support and free internet access to patrons. Public libraries are also trusted, value-driven organizations committed to the dissemination of knowledge and the promotion of civic ideals. However, public libraries' role in local e-government remains limited to providing reference support on the behalf of other agencies and offering internet access, despite there being four reasons public libraries are suited to build and maintain online collections of local government records.

Indeed, public libraries should consider acting as e-government administrators by building and maintaining online collections of local government records (online collections for short). They should do so for four reasons:

- 1) They can provide transparency
- 2) The public trusts libraries as institutions,
- 3) Libraries have expertise in supporting, accessing and preserving collections
- 4) There are precedents for libraries being the depository of state and federal documents.

By organizing records and making them available online, public libraries can improve accessibility and facilitate preservation. Information scientists and practitioners have yet to explore libraries' potential as e-government administrators despite their being institutions that can ensure civic information is posted online. Some libraries are also equipped to build and preserve collections of information in digital repositories, which may be expanded to include local government material.

Rooted in contemporary library and e-government research, this article

does not focus on efforts to collect and provide access to information through normal archives or depository programs. Many localities and municipalities maintain archives or records retention centers, but their capacities vary dramatically. Moreover, archives and depositories tend to emphasize content preservation or adherence with statutory requirements. Given these facts, I emphasize providing supplemental web-based access to content, which is to say that I am not arguing libraries should supplant other agencies or organizations. Finally, this article makes few claims about the work carried out by public libraries. It does not reflect on what is currently done but presents the case for what could be done. Certainly, there is reason to believe many libraries do not possess the means to build and maintain online collections, but it is important to ensure that limits in one context do not prevent work in others.

### What to Collect?

This article requires a working definition of *government records*, because print-based notions of documentation are insufficient to describe digital information. Therefore, records are formal publications or documents, including digital facsimiles, relevant to the public interest. These items document government activity and may include non-traditional resources like e-mails or data from relational databases. This information may sometimes be inaccessible to librarians due to technical and practical issues or even legal barriers. Since this is the case, I am not interested in providing a precise definition, but the point is that all information collected should make sense, meet patron needs, adhere with the law and be accessible online. In the United States there are thousands of city and county governments. Rather than attempting to dictate what public libraries serving these communities should collect and provide, I presume this decision ought to be made based on local considerations.

### Libraries and E-Government

An impressive amount of research documents the role public libraries play in facilitating the use of e-government services. Public libraries, however, do not usually function as administrators of online collections.

Several studies have identified libraries as internet access points and providers of reference support. Other studies highlight trends in federal policy or discuss traditional library activities. All of these studies are somewhat unified by an emphasis on e-government as an extension of government and the patron use of services through libraries. None, however, speaks about collection development, because they focus on reference and internet access or the impacts of libraries providing these services.

I am familiar with exception. A paper presented at the *Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research* mentions Chattanooga, Tennessee, and shows how its library system contributed to the city's data infrastructure [1]. This case study was limited as it only documented one instance in which the library managed data collection, curation and analytics but not government records as defined here. In any case, the point to draw is that research has observed public libraries as e-government access points or aggregators of information, but not collection builders or administrators. The trend has also been for libraries to contribute to e-government as intermediaries through the provision of internet access and/or reference service.

Many government agencies prefer to interact with the public online. Discussing libraries' role as e-government service facilitators, one noteworthy study provides a reason why they are typically service intermediaries. Utilizing a survey and interviews, this study found when government agencies move services online, "users often make their way to libraries and rely on librarian expertise to fulfill their e-government needs" [2, p. 121]. Yet, paradoxically, when this happens, mediated support is often eliminated. Documenting the consequences of this move, another study noted when services move online, responsibilities for providing support shift to "surrogate agency service providers" [3, p. 2]. Because not all members of the public possess internet access or want to interact with agencies online, they seek social services, renew licenses and pay taxes using library computers, where they can ask librarians for assistance.

This overview of academic research demonstrates that public libraries already play a role in providing information about local affairs. Within the e-government section of the *Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey* the importance of "provid[ing] information about a library's

community” was high (4.0 on a five-point Likert scale) [4, p. 24]. Given the studies discussed, however, practitioners and information scientists are not actively considering extending public libraries’ role to manage e-government services by providing online access to government records. Existing efforts are important, but their focus nevertheless presumes that other organizations and intermediaries such as City Hall will provide records online. Public libraries need not function as passive entities for each of the following reasons.

### Transparency

Transparency is necessary for democratic societies to function, and libraries have the potential to promote it. Format preferences also influence transparency requirements. Even prior to the widespread adoption of digital media, readers sometimes preferred electronic text to paper volumes. These preferences shape how citizens expect to stay informed about their local governments. Because there is sometimes a preference for electronic media to achieve transparency, citizens need access to media formats that reflect shifting information consumption habits. Supporting citizen transparency preferences is one reason public libraries ought to build online collections.

Seeking to foster citizen participation in government, e-government has been touted as a way to change the relationship between citizens and officials. The emergence and adoption of digital media has encouraged attempts at all levels of government to provide services online. While the promise of this transformation has yet to materialize, there is evidence that some communities support spending to develop e-government tools. Regarding federal government information, users prefer online access. At the same time, not all government agencies consider citizen expectations when building tools, and engaging citizens requires more than building online collections.

While it is difficult to ascertain citizen expectations, there is still evidence that online collections represent one service the public uniformly demands. The past 20 years have seen access-to-information laws rapidly adopted by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. This international push toward reform also parallels a

movement in favor of more transparency. A survey of 1,500 American citizens in 2007 establishes this point domestically. Utilizing a five-point Likert scale, this survey by researchers at Rutgers University and the City University of New York (CUNY) found that public opinion leans toward a liberal degree of civic record disclosure [5].

While transparency should not be absolute, the rationale associated with its fundamental value in a democratic society justifies libraries (strategically) building online collections of government records. In the United States, it is clear that citizens not only expect access to government records, but that disclosure and transparency remain necessary characteristics of a government legitimized by citizen participation. From this perspective, a public library acting as a local e-government service provider would provide a valuable service. Given the nature of format preferences, transparency promoted by online library services – if properly implemented – would further the aims associated with e-government.

### Trusted Institutions

The next reason public libraries should build online collections of local government records is that libraries are trusted. An Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) survey supports this point. Referencing its findings, “[p]ublic trust in cultural institutions is very strong: 86% of public library visitors and 77% of museum visitors rated them equal or higher in trustworthiness than all other sources of information” [6, p. 3]. Interestingly, another investigation by Public Agenda found that “public libraries seem almost immune to the distrust that is associated with so many other institutions” [7, p. 11]. This position of trust stems from the professional values to which librarians ascribe, which creates a unique opportunity for libraries to serve as online collection builders and operators.

In contrast to libraries’ position of trust, however, other information providers have seen their trust erode. Placed in comparison to the federal, state and local governments – as well as media outlets – public libraries tend to be held in high esteem. The Pew Research Center [8] determined that 64% of Americans (age 18 or older) held a “favorable view” of the federal government in 2002. Just 33% of adults held this opinion 10 years

later. Attitudes toward state and local governments have also declined, although they have still fared well in comparison to the federal government. Finally, the same is true for the media. It would be erroneous to say public libraries are the perfect source of government information, but their potential, as a trusted local, online provider is notable.

### Access, Preservation and Support

The third reason for public libraries to build and administer online collections of government records is they possess the ability to do so. Traditionally, libraries have provided free access to their collections. As a profession, librarianship emphasizes collecting and disseminating physical information, so replicating this approach in the digital realm makes sense. Librarian roles and library resources, therefore, enable many public libraries to promote access and preservation and to provide collection support for government records such as documents.

In today's environment, the strategic direction of libraries is evolving due to an increased demand for digital content. As a case in point: the rise of companies like Google and their associated business model. Given the emergence of freely available online search tools, tasks that used to require a visit to a library are executable from home if an information seeker has access to a computer and the internet. People still visit public libraries, but physical access to collections is not always required. It is only when individuals, publishers and/or relevant organizations do not post information to the internet that search engines, subscription databases and other tools are unable to provide access.

**Librarian Competencies.** Librarians possess the professional and technical competencies required for the organization of government records which would significantly improve information accessibility.

When librarians incorporate material into a collection, they process it, and digital items are no exception. Processing material can help librarians develop knowledge of the content housed in their collections. Improving staff familiarity with their content benefits users, regardless of preferred modes of access. Some library patrons prefer mediated, person-to-person assistance. Without engaging in a separate discussion about demographics,

however, all library users deserve support, be it online or via a reference interview. Building on the points made earlier [2] [3] that e-government often brings about the elimination of mediated service, the familiarization of librarians with government records would enable them to better serve those who desire direct interaction. More importantly, building online collections would mean that public libraries could more fully embody the ideals they espouse because, for libraries, improving accessibility is not something that should meet the format preferences of any single group.

**Improving Digital Preservation.** Libraries can employ strategies to preserve content based on differing needs. Yet, digital preservation is challenging, and the issues associated with electronic preservation have been known to exist for decades. Digital preservation is also a management issue and one that needs to be planned for and properly executed if it is to be successful. Related aspects of digital preservation include the content and technology needed to provide access for the chosen length of time. If public libraries opt to build digital collections, they are likely to emphasize free access. The rise of public libraries to a role as e-government administrator by posting content online would create a mechanism by which to host content in a way that promotes digital preservation outside of archives. This second source would not replace archives or records centers, but it would supplement their missions by encouraging outside redundancy.

**Collection Support.** A decade of research investigating digital libraries demonstrates that barriers to their development are a function of complexity. Still, while repository construction and maintenance require a variety of skills and expertise, sometimes not possessed by library staff, these challenges are frequently surmountable. Many organizational issues contribute to the cost of digital library creation. Moreover, the skills needed in this context are varied and fast changing. A key realization here is that despite challenges, "It is possible to build digital libraries, provided that there is a proper plan [... and a] suitable software environment to manage the processes" [9, p. 222].

Reinforcing the points made above, Texas Tech University's small law library recently reported building an institutional repository with limited

resources [10]. Cases of “shoestring budget” digital library creation also exist outside of academia. An ever-expanding suite of software exists including ContentDM, DSpace, Fedora Commons, Greenstone and Omeka. Moreover, public libraries that cannot afford to build and maintain custom repositories may also contract out some of their work. A vast commercial marketplace allows for public-private synergy. In light of these facts, there is reason to believe that offering collection support is within the means of many public libraries, though it is unlikely to be the case everywhere.

### Precedents

The final reason public libraries should build and administer online collections of local government records is that doing so would not be unprecedented. There are already state and federal examples of public and private libraries acting as depositories. Although the sole purpose of these libraries is not to act as an access point, such a precedent may be considered in the context of local, online environments with one example being the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP). FDLP participants are tasked with managing federal publications. Not exclusive to public libraries, this program still represents an instance of where libraries operate as information access points. The State Publications Access Program (SPAP) of the Missouri State Library is an example of a smaller, statewide program to collect and provide access to government information. Similar programs exist in Alaska, New York and Washington. The connection among all of

these examples is that they entrust libraries with collecting and maintaining documents so citizens can obtain information. In these cases, libraries function as sanctioned repositories for higher-level jurisdictional entities, so parts of this conceptual framework may be applied or extended to the local and electronic realms.

### Conclusions

Throughout this article, I argue that public libraries possess four reasons to build and administer online collections of local government information. Public libraries already facilitate the use of e-government services by providing mediated support and offering internet access to their patrons. They also have a longstanding tradition of providing access to government documents and other material. Four reasons were presented why public libraries should consider assuming the role of local e-government program administrator: 1) transparency in the democratic process, 2) trust in libraries, 3) expertise in access, preservation and collection support and 4) precedents from the depository of state and federal documents. To be sure, more information is needed to identify the contexts in which public libraries can actually build such collections, but it is undeniable that the public libraries’ potential to act as online services providers exists. The same is true, to a lesser extent, regarding the specifics of information to be collected in accordance with local laws, needs and circumstances. Library directors, technical experts and elected officials would be wise to consider this option. ■

*Resources on next page*



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