The Public Library’s Role in Enabling E-Government: A View of Two Countries in the English-Speaking Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

In most developed countries, linking citizens with e-government through Information Communication Technology (ICT) is an important social role for public libraries. Public libraries partner with government agencies; acting as intermediaries to bridge government with citizens in a way which adds value. In developing countries, public libraries have not attained that intermediary level. Instead, the role of public libraries is constrained to performing a tangential role to e-government. This includes its focus on the provision of access to information. As Caribbean governments progress further with e-government implementation, public libraries may need to expand their role beyond information provision to help citizens in their adoption of e-government, as well as enhance their service provision to them. This highlights some of the digital divide issues that developing countries experience versus information rich countries (i.e., developed nations) such as the United States of America. Thus, the digital divide is not only about access to ICTs; it also now includes citizens’ capacity to use ICTs. This paper examines the capacity and role of the public libraries in Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica in enhancing e-government efforts.

KEYWORDS

E-Government, English-speaking Caribbean, Information Communication Technology (ICT), Jamaica, Public Library, Service Delivery, Trinidad and Tobago

INTRODUCTION

In the English-speaking Caribbean, as in many other developing countries, the achievements of e-government have been hampered by its slow diffusion (Bissessar, 2012; Ifinedo & Uwadia, 2005; Roach, 2012; Roach & Cayer, 2010). Other issues impacting effective roll out include poor ICT infrastructure, digital divides, socio-economic, political, cultural, and organisational factors (Basu, 2004; Dada, 2006; Heeks, 1999; Ho, 2002; Moon, 2002 Roach, 2012; Roach & Cayer. 2010), and the perceived increase in corruption which has diminished the political will to move e-objectives along (Peterson, 1998).

The World Bank defines e-government as the “use by government agencies of information technologies that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government” (http://web.worldbank.org). Employment of these technologies are posited to serve a variety of different ends such as better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizen empowerment through access to information, or more
efficient government management. The resulting benefits are identified as less corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience, revenue growth, and/or cost reductions.

While governments in the Caribbean have concentrated on the economic aspects of e-government, “citizen empowerment through access to information” is not actively pursued. As a result of this lacuna, a majority of the population have been excluded either by commission or omission (Ifinedo, 2006). Those left out form a disenfranchised group, including but not limited to the poor and indigent, technically un-savvy individuals, marginal or limited educated individuals, residents and immigrants, the elderly and differently-abled (Bertot, Jaeger, & McClure, 2008). The expansive range of e-government information poses a barrier to those unfamiliar with government regardless of the access provided through the use of ICT (Jaeger & Bertot, 2011); or who are willing to use it (Netchaeva, 2002).

Further, the level of disconnect between citizens and government can be attributed, in part, to a country’s position on e-government. The Trinidad and Tobago National ICT plan 2012-2016, for instance, identifies e-government against a backdrop of “service delivery, increased productivity and securing competitive advantages” as they relate to one-stop service centers to service citizens. Comparatively, Jamaica’s National ICT strategy plan (2007-2012) focuses on e-inclusion, education and training, network readiness and infrastructure development, e-business and industry structure, e-government and legal and policy framework (Government of Jamaica, 2006); with priorities earmarked as those ministries and agencies that are revenue generating and facilitate international trade (Brown & Thompson, 2011). Therefore, while both countries focus on the development of internal systems to make government processes more efficient, neither speaks to social inclusion, which refers to public involvement and influence in government policies, and transparent and customer driven government (CARICOM, 2010).

The demographics of the target population of these e-government foci would appear to exclude disenfranchised groups; a population more likely to fall within the public’s library’s ambit. Some of the concerns which hinder citizens’ full engagement with e-government are reported as: lack of Internet access, especially for low-income individuals or citizens in rural areas; government agencies’ reluctance to engage citizens in the development of their e-government services or accept feedback; lack of computing skills, and technology requirements (such as browser requirements and plug-ins) that bar access to certain websites. As more government agencies focus on building web-sites, they are becoming increasingly sophisticated in the way they present information, although citizen use of the Internet has not evolved to such sophistication (Holden, Norris & Fletcher, 2002; Roach, 2012; Roach & Cayer, 2010). The result is a more incremental and not the required transformational change between government and citizens (West, 2004).

In light of the foregoing, this paper explores the capacity and role of the public libraries in Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica to enhance or support e-government services or efforts. Public libraries are strategically located, provide free public access to computers and the Internet, and have qualified staff to assist users with e-government information. In the politically rife climates of the Caribbean, the neutrality of public libraries on political matters serves to reinforce the public’s perception of them as trustworthy institutions such as those located in Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica respectively.

However, even with these positive perceptions, institutional framework, and public service roles that public libraries are poised to perform, there are still areas of less impact due to their lack of capacity building in the libraries’ actual resources to fulfil these roles to the nations and peoples they serve uniformly.
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