Libraries and E-Government: New Partnerships in Public Service

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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by

John Carlo Bertot, Ph.D.
Co-Director and Professor
iPAC, University of Maryland

Jessica McGilvray
Assistant Director
Office of Government Relations,
American Library Association

Paul T. Jaeger, Ph.D., J.D.
Co-Director and Professor
iPAC, University of Maryland

Ursula Gorham
Natalie Greene Taylor
Elizabeth Larson
Ruth Lincoln
Graduate Research Associates
iPAC, University of Maryland
Introduction

This executive summary describes the activities undertaken during phase two of the Libraries and E-Government: New Partnerships in Public Service demonstration grant. During this second phase of the project (January-June 2012), team members from the American Library Association (ALA), the Information Policy & Access Center (iPAC) at the University of Maryland, Towson University, and various partner libraries have been involved in the creation of the website LibEGov.org, the intended product of the demonstration grant.

Findings from the research phase (Phase 1) informed the development of the online resource, which 1) provides multiple tools and resources that offer “how to” guidance, highlight best practices, and promote a better understanding of e-government services (focused on the areas of taxation and immigration due to the participation of the IRS and USCIS in the project), and 2) facilitates the provision of e-government services through partnerships between libraries, government agencies, and communities organizations.

In addition to the web design and content creation, iPAC members developed research articles, presented at a professional conference, and submitted articles for future publication and conferences, all highlighting the research outcomes of Phase 1 of the project.

Research Implications for Web Design and Content Development

During Phase One of the demonstration grant, iPAC and ALA conducted a number of site visits, reviewed literature pertaining to libraries and e-government, and engaged in other activities (detailed in the Phase One Executive Summary) in order to determine 1) the most applicable content for the Web resource, 2) initial design parameters, and 3) desired outcomes of the Web resource. Using this approach, iPAC identified findings that were used to develop LibEGov.org.

Of particular importance to the team as we selected and developed content for the web resource were the following findings:

- **Community needs assessments are vital.**
  As indicated by the LibEGov.org website, “a community needs assessment is the process of determining the roles that your library can play – in terms of time, finances, location, responsibilities, and other factors – either as a stand-alone institution or in partnership with other local institutions, public or non-profit” ([http://libegov.org/training/cna](http://libegov.org/training/cna)). Because of the wide variety of user groups that public libraries might encounter, when dealing with e-government it is often best to start with a specific area of service and strive to make that particular function as responsive to the community you serve as possible (see Figure 1). Through the site visits and research conducted during Phase One, the project team saw several successful partnerships that applied these principles; The American Place at Hartford Public Library in Hartford, CT, for example, emphasizes immigration services in response to the high immigrant population of its community.
One of the larger issues that libraries are dealing with in the e-government service continuum is that there are pre-e-government activities that libraries must engage in prior to being able to help their users. These activities include such services as language classes and digital, basic, and civics literacy training. Breaking down e-government processes according to these potential limitations is necessary to getting information to patrons.

- **Tools and basic overviews of processes are an essential starting place.**

  One challenge to e-government service provision identified in Phase One was that libraries face a range of budgetary and infrastructure constraints. While in an ideal world libraries would have the resources needed to fully meet the needs of their communities, the current economic situation necessitates prioritizing services. The fact that, according to the most recent Public Libraries Funding and Technology Access Survey, close to two thirds of libraries (65.4%) have an insufficient number of workstations some or most of the time and 62.2% of libraries find that space limitations prevent additional workstations (Bertot, et al. 2012), it is clear that e-government services will have to be carefully selected to provide maximum benefit to a particular library’s population.

- **It is essential to remember limitations and to prioritize services accordingly.**

  In order to have high impact on users, however, organizations must think beyond the typical e-government services. Baltimore, for example, brings healthy food to those in food deserts by coordinating food drops at public libraries with the help of a local grocer and the county health department. This is a solution that extends beyond the service provisions of each of these organizations, but has a transformative impact on the community served.

- **Experiences should be shared with others.**

  Another challenge identified during Phase One is that library e-government roles have yet to be clearly defined in light of local service context. Librarians often lack the expertise on e-government topics, but by communicating with agencies (provided there are experts willing to work with the libraries) and by coordinating with other librarians, there is the potential for crowd-sourcing solutions to e-government challenges.

**Website Design Overview**

Through an iterative design process, team members worked with a graphic designer and a web developer to produce a site that directs librarians to subject specific resources in the areas of taxation and immigration, as well as provides them with general guidance on creating partnerships, performing community needs assessments, catering to different literacies, and addressing legal issues that might arise in an environment. A review of the best practice partnerships identified through site visits and interviews, such as Baltimarket in Baltimore, MD, immigration services at Austen Public Library in Austen, TX, and The American Place at Hartford Public Library in Hartford, CT show that there can be a much broader community involved in e-government activities than just the library alone. In an environment of limited resources, these community efforts may be vital to successfully meeting users’ needs.

- **Creative solutions are needed.**

  Innovative partnerships between agencies, non-profits, and libraries have shown that e-government solutions can transform communities. Balimarket, for example, brings healthy food to those in food deserts by coordinating food drops at public libraries with the help of a local grocer and the county health department. This is a solution that extends beyond the service provisions of each of these organizations, but has a transformative impact on the community served.
connection with e-government service provision. As discussed in greater detail below, the subcategories within each broad content area (e.g., “Taxation 101”) are broken down into two components — “Ready Reference” (information compiled from the websites of government agencies, educational institutions, and non-profit organizations) and “In Your Library” (ideas and materials to help users implement programming in their libraries). In choosing this approach, the team sought to provide visitors to LibEGov.org with tools and resources that could both help them more efficiently guide patrons to the specific e-government information and services they seek and to develop resources and programs that will address the e-government related needs of the communities they serve.

The site also includes a forum for agencies and librarians to discuss challenges and best practices. Included throughout the site are anecdotes about best practice partnership and e-government services that were gathered through the site visits and interviews conducted during Phase One.

- **Community Needs Assessments**
  The team addressed the topic of community needs assessments directly through a page that defines the process of conducting these assessments, identifies libraries who have used these assessments to produce innovative e-government services, and lists key questions that should be asked during this process.

- **Ready Reference**
  As mentioned, during the initial data collection of Phase One, researchers saw a clear need for librarians to have better access to basic information on the immigration and taxation processes. Throughout the site, we identified this information as “Ready Reference.” These sections include basic definitions, identify the most likely needed information on the processes, and provide direct links to the various processes identified throughout government agency websites.

To further assist librarians, we also created streamlined versions of key immigration processes (see Figure 2 below), with each “step” serving as a link to more detailed information (e.g., forms, applications, fact sheets, checklists). Therefore, after assessing where a patron is in the process, the librarian can directly access relevant information and does not have sort through information that does not apply to this particular individual’s situation.

![Figure 2. Screenshot taken from the Immigration 101 section of the site (LibEGov.org V.1)](image)

- **Addressing Challenges and Limitations**
  Keeping in mind the potential limitations of users lacking essential prerequisites for accessing e-government, such as basic, digital, and/or civics literacy skills and language skills, we developed literacy training guides for the site (see Figure 3).

We also determined that the guides to practical e-government activities we developed for the “In Your Library” sections of the site (e.g. class plans, website tips) should be designed for use by libraries with wide ranges of resources (time, staff, and money) and a wide range of users with varying skill levels. The “In Your Library” sections are still in development, but the team’s understanding of the continuum of e-government services has been at the forefront of our content discussions and decisions.
Creating Partnerships
The goal of the LibEGov.org website is to help librarians navigate the complicated e-government landscape. One way that libraries have already begun to accomplish this through the creation of partnerships with local non-profits and/or government agencies. The site aims to help interested libraries with find potential partners and to provide tips on forming and building these relationships (see Figure 4).

Sharing Experiences Online
A goal of the LibEGov.org site is to provide agencies and libraries with opportunities to share innovative ideas, challenges, and solutions about e-government related services. The forum section of the site (see Figure 5) encourages this interaction by opening dialogue between users.

Suggested topics include “In My Library,” a place for librarians to share their own experiences with programming and partnerships, content-specific sections designed to allow interaction about services relating to immigration and taxation, and a general discussion thread to encourage an open dialogue about these issues.

LibeEGov.org is an ongoing project. The items highlighted throughout this section are merely a fraction of what the site has to offer, and the project team continues to develop additional resources and information to incorporate into the site. Ideally, the sampling of descriptions included above demonstrates the extent to which the overarching goal of this project – to help librarians better meet the e-government needs of the communities they serve – is embodied in both the design and content of the LibEGov.org.

Products and Outreach
In addition to version one of the LibEGov.org website, the team also prepared several papers and presentations that feature data related to the findings of the E-Government partnership project. These efforts have resulted in the dissemination of the project’s research outcomes with a variety of academic and professional communities. The following list highlights some of the outreach opportunities taken by the team during phase two of the project:

- Representatives from the iPAC team presented a poster on the project on February 24, 2012 at the University of Maryland-College Park iSchool


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Doctoral Research Day poster competition. The poster was awarded second place.


Conclusion and Next Steps

Phase two of the Libraries and E-government Partnership Project focused on website design, usability testing, and reporting on findings. These intended goals were met with the successful pre-launch of LibEGov.org, the completion of the first round of usability testing, and the creation of several publications and conference papers.

It became clear throughout this phase of the project that the dimensions of e-government are vast. Themes such as the importance of prerequisites to e-government participation, the need for partnerships and allies in e-government services, and the challenges librarians and users face in distributing and utilizing e-government were clear. Phase three of the project, which will run from August 2012 to January 2013, will continue to utilize these themes. The team will focus on:

1) Creating additional content development,
2) Revisions to LibEGov.org based on usability testing
3) A second round of usability testing
4) Reporting findings from the project to the American Library Association and additional professional organizations, depending on paper acceptance, and
5) Beginning training sessions to demo the LibEGov.org site.

The timeline for these goals is outlined below:

- E-Government team meeting at the American Library Association conference (June 2012)
- Implementation of usability suggestions (July and August 2012)
- Additional content development (July and August 2012)
- Usability Testing Round #2 (August 2012)
- Training Sessions (Fall 2012)
  - Eastern Shore (November 5, 2012)

A full report from phase three of the project, along with an accompanying executive summary will be prepared for the next American Library Association Midwinter Meeting, scheduled for January 25-29, 2013.
About the Project

With the goal of helping libraries to better meet the e-government needs of users, the American Library Association and iPAC, through a partnership with a number of government agencies, public libraries, and academic libraries, is developing an e-government Web resource designed to foster collaboration among libraries and government agencies. Funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the project began in December 2010 and will run until December 2013.

About the Project Partners

The American Library Association was created to provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all. The current strategic plan, ALA Ahead to 2010, calls for continued work in the areas of Advocacy and Value of the Profession, Education, Public Policy and Standards, Building the Profession, Membership and Organizational Excellence.

The Information Policy & Access Center, housed within the University of Maryland, College Park’s iSchool, studies what policies and/or technologies lead to equitable and inclusive information access, a digitally literate population, and an informed and engaged public. iPAC aspires to be an innovative research and education facility that explores social, policy, and technology aspects of information access and use across cultural institutions, government agencies, and other information-based organizations.

The University of Illinois-Chicago is home to the Government Information Online (GIO) digital reference project (http://www.govtinfo.org/), and will coordinate embedding GIO into the Web resource. GIO is a free online information service supported by nearly twenty public, state and academic libraries throughout the United States, that are designated Federal depository libraries in the U.S. Government Printing Office’s Federal Depository Library Program.

The Internal Revenue Service is a bureau of the Department of the Treasury. In fiscal year 2010, the IRS collected more than $2.3 trillion in revenue and processed more than 230 million tax returns. The mission of the IRS is to provide America’s taxpayers top quality service by helping them understand and meet their tax responsibilities and enforce the law with integrity and fairness to all.

The U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services is the federal agency that oversees lawful immigration to the United States. A component of the Department of Homeland Security, the agency provides services such as citizenship, immigration of family members, help with working in the U.S., verifying an individual’s legal right to work in the U.S., humanitarian programs, adoptions, civic integration, and genealogy help.

The U.S. Government Printing Office’s core mission is Keeping America Informed, dating back to 1813 when Congress determined to make information regarding the work of the three branches of Government available to all Americans. The U.S Government Printing Office (GPO) provides publishing and dissemination services for the official and authentic government publications to Congress, Federal agencies, Federal depository libraries, and the American public.

The Connecticut State Library is an Executive Branch agency of the State of Connecticut. The State Library provides a variety of library, information, archival, public records, museum, and administrative services for citizens of Connecticut, as well as for the employees and officials of all three branches of State government. The State Library also serves students, researchers, public libraries and town governments throughout the state. In addition, the State Library directs a program of statewide library development and administers the Library Services and Technology Act state grant.
The Florida State Library and Archives The Division of Library and Information Services is the designated information resource provider for the Florida Legislature and all state agencies. It also coordinates and helps to fund activities of public libraries, provides a framework for statewide library initiatives, provides archival and records management services, and preserves, collects, and makes available the published and unpublished documentary history of the state.

The Maryland Division of Library Development and Services guides and develops statewide Maryland public library network services through leadership and consultation in technology, training, marketing, funding, resource sharing, research and planning, so that Maryland libraries can fulfill their missions now and in the future to the people of Maryland.

The New Jersey State Library believes access to information and libraries empowers people, organizations and government. As leader of the more than 2,000 member libraries in the NJ Library Network, the State Library takes a proactive and innovative approach in guiding libraries and providing information to foster a literate, productive and competitive New Jersey.

The Texas State Library and Archives preserves the record of government for public scrutiny, secures and makes accessible historically significant records and other valuable resources, meets the reading needs of Texans with disabilities, and builds and sustains statewide partnerships to improve library programs and services.

Funding

The study is funded by a grant from The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). The mission of IMLS is to create strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas. Through grants, research, and initiative activities, the Institute makes an impact in a number of diverse issue areas, among them 21st century skills, community and civic engagement, and lifelong learning.

About the Authors

John Carlo Bertot, Ph.D., is Co-Director of the Information Policy & Access Center (ipac.umd.edu) and Professor in the University of Maryland College Park iSchool.

Jessica McGilvray is Assistant Director of the Office of Government Relations in the American Library Association’s Washington Office.

Paul T. Jaeger, Ph.D., J.D., is Co-Director of the Information Policy & Access Center and Assistant Professor in the College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland.

Ursula Gorham is a doctoral student in the College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland and a Graduate Research Associate at the Information Policy & Access Center.

Natalie Greene Taylor is a doctoral student at the University of Maryland’s College of Information Studies and a Graduate Research Associate at the Information Policy & Access Center.

Elizabeth Larson is a graduate of the University of Maryland’s iSchool. Currently, she is a Faculty Research Assistant at the Information Policy & Access Center, as well as a member of the University of Maryland’s University Libraries reference staff.

Ruth Lincoln is a graduate of the University of Maryland’s iSchool. She is a former Graduate Research Associate at the Information Policy & Access Center.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
The Information Policy and Access Center (iPAC) is a response to the pressing need for research on the processes, practices, policies, and social issues that govern access to information in our increasingly digital information society. We at iPAC are committed to studying what policies and/or technologies lead to equitable and inclusive information access, a digitally literate population, an informed and engaged public, or access Internet-enabled resources and technologies, among key examples.

iPAC aspires to be an innovative and forward-looking research and education facility that explores social, policy, and technology aspects of information access and use across cultural institutions, government agencies, and other information-based organizations; communities; and populations.

iPAC focuses on three major areas of research and education:

- Libraries, Cultural, and Public Institutions – Research on institutions, such as public libraries, school library media centers, archives, museums, and government agencies that are the sources of information, resources, services, and unifying space within their communities.
- Policy – Analysis of the policies that shape the ways in which these institutions can serve their communities, as well as the roles of these institutions as access points for and providers of government and other information and services in society.
- Diverse Populations – Advocacy and emphasis on the ways in which institutions and policies can promote inclusive information access and services for individuals and communities, including the underserved, underrepresented, and disadvantaged by embracing innovative approaches to diversity.

Through these core aspects of cultural institutions, iPAC seeks to contribute to scholarship and the information professions at the international and national levels, while also serving the local needs of libraries and other cultural institutions in the Washington, DC metropolitan area and the state of Maryland.