

NIC AND ACCESSES TO INFORMATION THROUGH OFFICIAL WEBSITES OF DISTRICTS OF UTTAR PRADESH IN THE INFORMATION AGE: AN EVALUTATION

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: The purpose of the article is to look in to the various aspects of official websites of districts of Uttar Pradesh . It targets to know the problems and challenges come in to the way of timely access to information of public interest through these websites .It will try to investigate what could be done to enhance public reach to access to information regarding governance.

Methodology: The study is survey based in this evaluative observation of official website of various districts have been done . As UP is a big state having more than seventy districts . Therefore it is difficult to study websites of each district . To overcome this all the districts of the state are arranged alphabetically and every tenth district's website is selected for evaluation under various attributes .The Public perception and public opinion regarding these has also taken into account .

Findings: The study reveals that these official websites are of immense importance as an information gateway for large section of population. Due to lack of any standardization and absence of any defined policy regarding insurance of timely access to information these stand for behind in serving the purpose . It is found that low information literacy and absence of information culture are serving as hurdle ponits in proper access and usage of information .

Keywords: Nic, E goverence, website visibility.

INTRODUCTION

21ST century is dominated by information and its access . Societies will be characterized by information rich or information poor . Access to right information at right time plays a catalytic role to socio-economic development while failure in the same hinders the progress. Sections of the society having timely access to information will dominate in the process of development. For insuring the development in totality or what is called inclusive growth one have to insure the timely access to information to each and every citizen of the country. Informed citizens of a country can play active role in proper implementation of policies and projects of socio-economic development . Nowadays governments across the world are giving lot of emphasis on developing good information networks . Information technology provides us tools for dissemination of information to the masses . Every country have their information highways in our country we have NIC (national informatics centre) which plays important role in catering the information need of public at large specially the government information. Official websites of districts do play important role in making people aware about government policies and practices at the grass root level.

For democracy to flourish every individual should get equal importance and every one must have participation in decisions affecting their lives . This can be achieved by insuring freedom of expression and access to information to each and every citizen. Access to information is vital for transparency, accountability and rule of law .

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Various studies have been carried out across the globe to assess the need status, potentials and challenges and barriers in the implementation of e government initiatives. Ion Holiday (2002) conducted a study taking 16 states and quasi states of South East Asia to evaluate the progress of ASEAN's 1999 – 2004 Action plan . The study suggest that to many things to be done to bridge the development gaps exist among highly diverse nations . It founds that there is close relation between GDP per capita and internet activity . To build e government through ICT progress ASEAN must pay renewed attention to strategy. Janet Kaaya (2003) conducted a content analysis study to determine the status of government websites in three East African countries Kenya Tanzania and Uganda using attributes like establishment year, usability and visibility . The study concludes that all the East African countries websites are at the first and second stage of development and corresponding e governance services. There are various services that governments across the globe are using to reach their users electronically . However the basic service is dissemination of information about structure and functions of various government agencies . Silcock (2001) indicates one of the major potential areas of e- government services is that it can facilitate democratic activity (e democracy). Netchaeva (2002) notes that Singapore developed a government portal , E Citizen to maximize use of e government to enhance people participation in democracy . All this led Singapore to become the first country in the world to conduct population census online . In addition Netchaeva also reports that studies in many countries including USA, UK shows that people want more and more e government participation. Key prerequisite for implementing E government services is to have the necessary infrastructure in place these may include computer hardware and software together with reliable telecommunication services facilities for connectivity . It is found that there are many barriers in this way specially in developing world . It is important to address these barriers and challenges of e-government implementation . One of the fundamental issue among these barriers is existing digital divide among people which may be a result of socio economic conditions, language barriers , age and education etc. Mutula (2002) in reviewing the contribution of Africa to global internet itemizes the problems that African countries are facing in creating and accessing such content these are existing disparity in infrastructure development between urban and rural areas and associated poor power and telephone supplies ; English dominated content which is understood only by minority elite. It is widely accepted that implementation of e government services should go hand in hand with strategies to narrow the digital divide . For e government to be fully successful the dream internet access for all has to become a reality. The present study is an approach to examine the realities of e government implementation in state of Uttar Pradesh the most populous state of largest democracy India .

NATIONAL INFORMATICS CENTRE (NIC)

NIC under the development of technology of the government of India is a premier Science and Technology

organization at the fore front of the active promotion and implementation of information and communication technology in the government . NIC has revolutionized the e-Governance drive in the country for last three decades building a strong foundation for better and more transparent governance and assisting the government endeavor to reach the unreached. In the year 1975 the government of India envisioned that the strategic use of information technology in government would lead to more transparent and efficacious governance which could give a fillip to all round development . In 1976 , in the wake of this recognition of potency of IT , the government visualized a project of enduring importance viz. National Informatics Centre. Subsequently with the financial assistance of the United Nations Development Program(UNDP) NIC was set up. NIC has leveraged ICT to provide a robust communication backbone and effective support for e-Governance to Central government , state governments, UT administration districts and other government bodies. NIC offers a wide range of ICT services . This include NICNET , a nation wide communication network with gateway nodes at about 53 departments of the government of India , 35 states/ UT secretariats and 603 district collectorate to service ICT applications. DISNIC a NICNET based district governance program started in 1985 to overcome the digital divide in district administration .

PRODUCTS OF NIC

NIC endeavors to ensure that the latest technology in all areas of IT is available to its users . It is one of the total solution providers to the government and is actively involved in most of the IT enabled applications and has changed the mindset of the working community in the government to make use of latest state of art technology in their day to day activities to provide better services to the citizens . NIC conceptualized, developed and implemented various programme and projects some of them have been made into product to be customized across the country. Different states are running various products namely e – Rajaswanayalaya , e – Nagarik Sewa , e – MAN , e – Granthalaya , DISHA etc. successfully. Official websites of Districts : As it is mentioned earlier that every district headquarter across the country have a NIC node . Information input for this is provided by district administration . This node serves as the official website for the district . URLs for these includes name of the district .nic.in . The basic function of these website is to display public information .

Profile Of The State : Ruskin Bond once said that Uttar Pradesh is a world in itself dueto its vast variety of language culture and dress. Spread in 240928 sq km area . It is divided into 75 Districts and 18 Divisions.Uttar Pradesh is the most populous state of India with its population nearly 200 million . Culturally rich and religiously important state of the country it stand below national average in different development parameters due to lack of discipline and poor infrastructure conditions . On the front of access to basic amenities the state stands way behind in comparison to other states of the country . As for as literacy rate, child mortality and GDP growth is concerned it shows dragging effect to the national average . Due to low information literacy and poor IT skills digital divide is most prevalent in the state . For better utilization of the existing potentials of the state many steps are required . One of these include development of proper information infra structure to insure the access to information regarding policies and practices of the agencies to each and every citizen of the state without any discrimination of rural urban castae creed etc.

ANALYSIS OF THE WEBSITES OF SELECTED DISTRICTS

Analysis of websites of seven selected districts have been carried out under different attributes given by different researchers at different occasions.The study was conducted during first half of month of March 2012. These selected districts are :

1. Bijnor, 2. Deoria, 3. Gorakhpur, 4. Kanpur Nagar, 5. Mahoba, 6. Shaharanpur,7. Varanasi

Website Visibility : Visibility can be considered as key aspect for an information being accessed .Anything which is more visible have greater chance of being accessed. Using Holiday(2002) approach to assess the visibility of the official websites of districts internet was searched using search engines like Google and Yahoo .It was done by typing the URL i.e. the name of the selected district followed by dot nic. It was considered that if it appears in first 10 results of first few hits it will conform its visibility . It is found that

almost all the websites are cent percent visible. So we can say that on the visibility attribute these are up to the expectation.

Website establishment date : This attribute also serves as an important parameter of any website as it helps us in knowing the extent of learning experience of the website owner(Ho 2000) . More experience of the owner indicates more experience in maintaining website.This help them to incorporate more and more information to the users and it may go for new experiments to become more interactive and user oriented . It also indicates status of e government implementation . In the present study we found that most of the websites do not have information regarding their inception . Although most of them have been established in late nineties. It indicate that many of them may be more than two decade old which is enough period in the field. It provide them the opportunity to know the various aspects of the website . With this long experience they come to know what are needed to be done for more efficient and timely access to information to the people.

Website ownership : Ownership issue is a key factor for any website as it reflects the seriousness of the agency concerned in implementation of e government services .

Porte et al(2002) note : “The aim is to ascertain if the agency itself is tailoring the material for the site or has shunted these content decision to someone else . Agencies that own their own web operations are more likely to consider it a key part of their organization compared with those that leaves the development of their website to others”.

The ownership data for present study was captured from the homepage of the concerned websites. No clearly defined ownership information was found. Responsibility for the content was assigned to the concerned departments while host of the website NIC comes with the disclaimer that it is not responsible for content on the website. It is also found that there is lack of synergy between different agencies responsible for the content. It appears that official website of districts serves as a platform which provides link to different other websites without taking any ownership responsibility. As said by Porte et al(2002) if the agency hosting the website comes with content responsibility it would have been a focus area for their operations but in this case it is not so as they or not responsible for the content. It certainly affects the quality of the content .

Website freshness : Similar to the ownership , assessment of website freshness gives a general picture of how serious a government agency considers e government in order to keep the information updated . For the present study date of last update was searched from the homepage and other source pages linked to it . Websites which were not updated for more than six month are considered to have out dated information . Such websites are considered as slow in achieving full e government service delivery and access . It is found that out of seven websites under study only one found to contain updating information six others do not have any information regarding it . Through various other ways we tried to assess the website freshness it was found that majority of websites are not fresh neither they nor the websites linked them contain updated information with this we conclude that these are outdated and fail serve the cause i.e. to implement the e government services properly .As we are living in the information age and information plays a key role in our decision making so timely access to required information make a lot of difference. Keeping this in to mind we can say that a website with outdated information is fail to serve the purpose.

Website usability : Under this issue our focus is to assess the various aspects of utility of the websites . Under this we evaluated that how user friendly these websites are and what kind of additional information they provide which may be helpful in access to the needed information by the users . this includes the very appearance of the homepage and the additional links they provide .For better understanding we can divide this into following sub headings :

Important Links : A website providing links to relevant bodies within and outside the government system is considered user friendly since the user just click to the link to access the needed information instead of conducting a new search . The extent to which a website is user friendly will certainly helps in achieving the objectives of e governance. For the present study appearance of the home page and links it provides to other websites and sources of information available on it are taken into note. it is found that many of the websites

have very informative and good built homepage while others do not have a good quality homepage . We found that almost all the websites has provided links to other websites of government agencies which serves the purpose of dissemination of important information of public use .

Contact Information : It to is a very important attribute of any website as it enables the users to contact the concerned officials whenever any clarification is required regarding the content of the website . During the study it was found that almost all the websites provide contact information about officials and administrator concerned . Although it is found that there is no appropriate response from these officials and administrators when tried to contact them in majority of cases .Major cause behind such situation may be lack of work force and proper skill to deal with flow of queries and clarifications . These situations are certainly not very encouraging in order to proper implementation of e government services as it requires an accountable and responsive system.

Interactivity : Website interactivity signifies the level of two way communication between a government agency and the users . Intention of this was to know if the owners provide any option for feedback inputs or not and if they provide it what is their responsiveness towards the feedback obtained from the users . In the study we found that most of the websites do not provide any option for feedback input even if they provide they do not care about the inputs they get back through it .In the era when information and its communication has created various modes and platforms. Now two way interaction is mandatory for the successes of any service in such situation not providing option for getting feedback of the user in response to a service or not accommodating the inputs obtained from the feedback shows a traditional approach and it must be readdressed.

Language used : Under this attribute our intension was just to know whether the language of communication used by these official websites represents the language of the target population . Mutula (2002) observes that the general insignificance of the contribution by African countries to online content is the use of the language that represent the minority of the population. Taking above observation into account we can say that as majority of the information on these websites are in English language which is not language of communication in this part of the world so language also acts as hurdle point in optimum use of information available on these websites .

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

Although these websites are very good access point for information of public interest at district , state and national level . While going through various district websites we can easily conclude that they fail to serve the purpose up to the expectations .There are many reasons behind their failure in proving their importance . It will be better to mention some of the main problems .

1. Absence of ICT skills in majority of people specially in rural areas.
2. Absence of awareness among people about these websites.
3. Absence of positive attitude towards using ICT.
4. Absence of any defined policy regarding updating information on these websites
5. Absence of information culture among the people.
6. Absence of any mass campaign to make people familiar regarding these websites
7. Due to Absence of any proper authority people hardly trust information available on these websites so lack of any defined responsibility behind these information also act as an hurdle.

CHALLENGES

Although we are living in the information age but even today we fail to make the majority of our population aware about the importance of information and its access .Government is running various programs to make people Information Literate but hardly we could see any impact of these programs on the ground reality . I found roots of these in ours being a traditional society which always resist to change. Certainly our information literacy mission have to effort in full for bringing any change in the situation . We could make few points that may be the real challenges in proper and timely access to information.

1. We need to make our information literacy programs more accountable and practical.
2. We need to create more and more public E- seva Kendras in rural areas .

3. It is essential to provide the information of public interest and its searching facility in the language of the majority i.e. Hindi.
4. Public attitude towards the ICT must be changed as it is a necessity of the 21st century.
5. Computer education must be compulsory part of our school education system not only on paper but in reality .
6. Creation of up-to-date ICT network in every villages , towns and cities .
7. It is important to ensure the functioning of the ICT network. Its proper maintenance must be insured which is not a practice in our part of the world
8. We need to get rid of the so called Chalata hai policy and make our public servants more responsible and accountable towards their duties.
9. The real challenge is to set a responsible and accountable system which could look in to various aspects of our E- governance programs.

CONCLUSIONS

Living in the information age it is easy to realize the importance of timely access to information . Information is the most important ingredient of each and every developmental activity .This study has tried to examine the access to information through official websites of districts in Uttar Pradesh by evaluating different attributes of these websites like visibility, usability ,intractability, freshness etc. We found that although we have a very good information network in form of NIC. This provides us immense potential for communication of information almost every where in the country but due to different reasons like low information literacy , lack of information culture ,lack of sense of urgency regarding timely access to information its optimum use has not been done . As far as regarding official websites of districts is concern it is found that due to absence of clearly defined accountability and responsibility these are not very fruitful to the end users . Nic sets responsibility regarding content to the related departments. It is well known fact that majority of the departments specially in Hindi speaking states are run under Chalata hai Approach and that is why they do not believe in timely updating and maintaining the websites. It is important to create a defined policy regarding maintenance and uptodateness of content on these websites at the same time it is important to address the problems at the users end like language of communication of information and promoting IT skills in the society .

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