

# **Information as Empowerment**

## **Building the Content Foundation of "effective e-Governance**

### **By Gourav Jaswal**

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#### **Abstract**

Traditionally, technology has been thought of as the center piece of any e-governance strategy. However, recent experience from around the world shows that actually information is the key element of e-governance.

This is because most e-governance initiatives envisage the delivery of services from government to citizens. And these services are either made up of information (such as databases of land records, government reports) or have information as the key 'completing' factor for the service (as in citizen polls where the framing of the issue correctly is a pre-requisite for the citizen to 'vote' appropriately).

Governments are the richest source of information that is always useful and often critical for the citizen. Governments are also usually very poor at information management- archiving, presenting and making this information available.

This lack of information or content proficiency hampers every e-governance initiative since information is a very critical component in any value chain of service that the government is supposed to provide for the citizen- healthcare, law and order, public transport and so on. And while intrinsic limitations of resources are a major reason for deficiency of services to the citizen, the satisfaction level of the government citizen interaction can often be dramatically improved merely by making quality information easily accessible.

Therefore, this paper seeks to sensitize decision-makers that information strategy is the foundation of any e-governance initiative. It also seeks to highlight general principles that can guide such information strategy development.

#### **Detailed Paper**

##### **The Problems of Governance in real life**

What is the most common barrier to satisfactory government-citizen interaction?

The absence of the right information. Why do hundreds of harassed businessmen run from one desk to another in the Secretariat? Because they do not know the five simple steps to applying for a land permit. Why do dozens of people crowd around a single clerk in the Sub-Divisional Magistrate's office? For getting as simple a piece of information as the correct process for a court marriage. Why does an unscrupulous policeman oppress a villager? Simply because the citizen does not know that a copy of the FIR report is his right, not a favour to be given only upon a monetary consideration.

Information is the most empowering tool. But just securing accurate information in a timely manner takes up countless hours of the people, lowers the productivity of government officials, prevents valuable work from being done and unnecessarily creates friction between well-meaning bureaucrats and frustrated citizens.

Every new initiative that the government may launch ends up performing worse than expected. The reason is not only inefficiency or corruption. It is commonly due to the fact that the initiative has not made the all-important connection to the people. People are either not aware about it or have a vague knowledge and therefore cannot be bothered to know more about it.

Thus it is that even forward thinking initiatives like the introduction of Consumer Courts in the state, are bogged down by the weight of clueless citizens who mill about the court premises.

Of course, the government spends considerable time and money in communicating critical information to the people through its Information & Public Relations department as well as specialized media. And now increasingly, through websites launched with great fanfare.

Unfortunately, these ventures often fail. The major reason for this is that the content itself is not attractive, interesting or informative.

So why do Government communication initiatives fail?

Why are government-commissioned news-reels (now broadcast by law before every film exhibited in cinema halls) greeted with derision and disinterest, while detailed, historical dramas like *Chanakya* and *Mahabharat* attract a loyal audience of millions?

Why do some content businesses like *Time* magazine and *Discovery Channel* successfully reach out to audiences of millions, despite that fact that they are knowledge-based and not entertainment-based businesses? Why does *India Today* outsell by millions, government-subsidized communication media like *Yojana* (Journal of the Planning Commission) and *Science Reporter* (a magazine from CSIR)?

Which is why, more than the thousands of hours of government-sponsored documentaries, one film made by a Britisher (Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi*) is responsible for the identification with 'our' Bapu.

Why is it that advertising jingles for instant noodles are hummed by rural children who will never see the product, while they remain blissfully unaware of important measures that are arguably directed to their benefit?

The answer is clearly, compelling content. Information as a package. Content is the magnet that will attract or repel people. Content will ensure that your message either gets completely forgotten or gets indelibly seared in the minds of people.

Unfortunately, it is rare that such compelling content is produced in e- governance initiatives led by bureaucrats with general management abilities. This unfortunate fact has ensured that many e-governance initiatives usually fail to communicate.

### **How is Information or Content related to E-Governance?**

E-governance includes measures that allow a more participatory, interactive and meaningful interaction between the government and the citizen. An interaction that enables the people to take their own decisions, benefit as much as possible from the initiatives of the government and also contribute to make the process of governance more efficient and useful.

Obviously, the backbone of e-governance is not technology, but an informed citizen. Technology (fibre-optic state-wide backbone for data transmission, community internet access centers in villages) can only make access possible. But this possibility does not mean that participation will happen. Just as equipping thousands of villages with television sets made no perceptible difference to their awareness levels, equipping them now with community internet access and developing official web-sites (which is what e-governance is usually understood to mean) will not significantly benefit them.

The missing link is content. Content that is built up in co-operation with the audience for whom they are meant to address. Content that informs them, enlightens them, and empowers them to actively participate in the process of governance.

Content that has the ability to deliver memorable messages needs to be produced by qualified, skilled specialists who possess an understanding of the principles of information design. Who have awareness of the principles of cognition, a deep insight into consumer behavior, sensitivity towards good writing and layout and the skills to use modern computer-based tools to bring this together.

The basic framework of such powerful content will be the foundation of any e-governance initiative.

Content that connects the Government with its own people.

### **So how can Information be used in E-Governance?**

If Information Design is to be the Foundation of e-governance, then these are the assumptions:

- i. Governments are the richest source of information that is always useful and often critical for the citizen
- ii. Governments are usually very poor at information management- archiving, presenting and making this information available

- iii. Information is a very critical component in any value chain of service that the government is supposed to provide for the citizen- healthcare, law and order, public transport and so on.
- iv. While intrinsic limitations of resources are a major reason for deficiency of service to the citizen, the satisfaction level of the government citizen interaction can often be dramatically improved merely by making quality **information easily accessible**

Therefore, if every e-governance initiative should make available to every citizen, attractively designed and easily accessible information that is structured for *his* needs, not from the point of view of the government.

This information transformation will positively influence the experience that citizens have with their government.

Such an initiative usually involves the following steps:

- a) An assessment of the basic information needs of the target audience of that particular e-governance program
- b) Gathering the information required, which is likely to be scattered across various departments and agencies
- c) Converting the information into a digital form
- d) Translation of the content into the local languages where required
- e) Applying Information Design processes to structure the content in the appropriate format
- f) Porting the content into the appropriate, web-ready format
- g) Developing the citizen gateway- a website or scattered kiosks- through which the audience can access this information

One example is *Understanding USA*, a private project by Richard Saul Wurman (a famed information designer who coined the term 'information architect') that explains many aspects of the functioning of the government of the United States. Wurman used the best of graphic artists, writers and researchers to create a wonderful encyclopedic snapshot of important aspects of American governance. Complex issues such as Crime, State Budgets, Education and Federal Income were captured in a manner that they became understandable to even a person with average education and intellect.

The entire content was printed in the form of a book and then put up on a website [www.understandingusa.com](http://www.understandingusa.com). As he says:

"Public information refers to everything that explains our citizenship...everything that we agree should be available to the body politic. Making information public means presenting, designing and structuring this information so that it is accessible, available, understandable and free."

Therefore, just as e-governance efforts are now initiated by technology discussions, they must early on, involve experts who understand how to present information. It must be understood that since every project largely involves the dissemination of information, it should plan to involve visualisers, writers, illustrators and researchers to create content that answers the basic questions and problems of citizens.

This content *cannot* be in the standard 'government' format that is usually associated with complexity and confusion.

The communication vehicles of the e-governance initiative (kiosks, websites, downloadable files, CD-RaM's) should use the most advanced principles of information design- graphics, cartoons showing characters that the people can identify with, simple flow charts- which will make the process of understanding significantly easier.

### **Are there any 'Tips & Tricks' to remember?**

First, remember that the purpose is to ensure communication, not to impress or to follow convention. Therefore every information component must be a quantum- leap above the standard 'government' format that is usually associated with complexity and confusion.

Helpful guidelines are:

## **Digital Flow: Be Future ready**

This content should be created in a completely digital work process, therefore making it suitable not only for distribution through the print format, but also allowing its simple conversion for distribution through the interactive multimedia (CD ROM, kiosks, DVD) and Internet medium.

## **Research to understand problems, use information as a solution**

Rather than enumerate meaningless facts, the communication should work backward from a problem and endeavor to collect all information related to that. For example, a downloadable brochure, should not be organized by administrative sections, but from the user's point of view.

Rules relating to the District Hospital thus can be re-structured as "How can I discharge a patient prematurely?" This could then go on to illustrate step by step, what a person needs to do, where he needs to go, which forms he needs to fill. Current phone numbers, designations of important officials, samples of forms required, directions and addresses of offices all of the information that a person would need to completely answer the question from one simple leaflet.

## **Updated Information**

The process of creating the material should be digital and only as many printed copies as are required should be produced at one time. This would keep the information current and do away with the 'outdated directory' syndrome that affects all government departments who produce communication material only annually or biannually.

## **Interactive/ Feedback**

Participation, corrections and suggestions from users need to be actively solicited. No material should be prepared until the potential users of that material have been involved in the process of creation of that material. An online 'Handbook for Industries' for example, should not be prepared until the team creating the material has finished ground level conversations with the audience to determine what kind of information they need.

So can taking a 'information' approach to 'e-governance' really work?

Let's recall that while most of us were repelled by our standard history books in school, we received a wonderful 'education' in the history, culture and mythology of our country through the unique approach of the founder of *Amar ChitTa Katha*, Anant Pai. The message was interesting and memorable and we learnt effortlessly. And all the time, never considered it 'learning'.

The intention is to create in a digital format, something as interesting as an *Amar ChitTa Katha* (obviously not only in a comic form!) for all e-governance initiatives that the people need to be involved in.

## **About the Author**

Gourav Jaswal is the founder and head of Synapse, a not-for-profit foundation that works in the area of information technology and communication. " Synapse works with governments, public institutions and private corporations to help them understand and use information technology better. Its client list of several dozen includes USAID, Reserve Bank of India, CSIR, Positra SEZ, the Government of Madhya Pradesh, and ControlNet Corporation USA. Its White Paper on 'Demystifying E-governance' has been received and appreciated by nearly a dozen state governments in India.

Gourav was previously the founding chief executive of a technology media company, which under his helm, launched 5 print magazines, 11 book titles, 7 multimedia products and 2 major Internet properties.

The first product he was responsible for was CHIP magazine, which in less than two years grew to become the country's largest selling technology publication. With an audited circulation of more than 80,000 copies (a lead of more than 70% over its nearest competitor) it was considered one of the most successful magazine launches in India in the past decade.

He also initiated many successful alliances with international companies including Ziff Davis, a US-based global leader in technology media and CMP, a \$800 million media company.

His educational qualifications include a graduate degree in Economics and a Master's degree in Communication, in both of which he graduated at the top of his class.

He has been a speaker at several more than two hundred events including seminars and discussion forums in Delhi, Bangalore and Mumbai. He has also conducted business sessions and seminars in many countries including Singapore, Hong Kong, Germany, and Taiwan.

His previous work experience includes journalistic stints in the mainstream media, involvement with the television medium and interactive multimedia. He has edited a critically acclaimed book (*Terrorism: Punjab's Recurring Nightmare*) and also worked as an entrepreneur, managed his own marketing company.

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