

# e-Government and e-Inclusion. The Role of the Public Libraries

Mariusz Luterek<sup>(✉)</sup>

Faculty of Journalism, Information and Book Studies,  
University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland  
m.luterek@uw.edu.pl

**Abstract.** The aim of this paper is to present and discuss opinions of the librarians on the role of public libraries as intermediaries in access to public information and services in Poland. The assumption is that Polish public libraries, following the example of United States and United Kingdom, could fulfill the role of intermediaries in access to e-government, empowering citizens and promoting e-inclusion. The data collection was executed through an online survey, which was subjected to libraries in three voivodeships.

**Keywords:** Public information · Public services · e-Government · Public libraries · Poland

## 1 Introduction

Transformational, digital, or electronic, government (e-government) is the use of information and communication technologies in providing information and services by public authorities. The concept itself was named in the mid-1990s, as the result of introducing government to the World Wide Web, although computers were used in public sector much earlier [2]. Since then the understanding of what e-government is has changed significantly. At first, it was “a tool for information and service provision to citizens”, then a way to “enhances the capacity of public administration through the use of ICTs to increase the supply of public value”, and “continuous innovation in the delivery of services, public participation and governance through the transformation of external and internal relationships by the use of information technology”, to finally be understood as “use and application of information technologies in public administration to streamline and integrate workflows and processes, to effectively manage data and information, enhance public service delivery, as well as expand communication channels for engagement and empowerment of people” [3]. That means, that at the beginning the implementation of e-government was supply driven, then it switched to citizen centric approach, to finally involving different groups of stakeholders in planning and improving e-government solutions [4].

Surprisingly, public authorities often forget that in some social groups access to ICTs is limited to the point of digital divide, which refers not only to technology, but also ICT literacy (using digital technology, communication tools, and/or networks appropriately to access, manage, integrate, evaluate, and create information).

That's why e-inclusion is necessary in order for people to be able to use and benefit from e-Government applications [5]. Nowadays, as many authors discuss, e-government and e-inclusion should be seen as two parallel processes of government intervention to support a socially inclusive development strategy [6].

Much works related to the problem of e-inclusion in the case of e-government have been published. That includes problems like: e-inclusion gaps [8], digital literacy [9], or e-exclusion of certain groups [10, 11], among others.

Quite naturally public libraries emerged as intermediaries in access to public information and services in many countries, especially in United States and United Kingdom. That's why, looking for inspirations on how to address the problem of e-inclusion in case of e-government, one could take a look at American the system of Federal Depository Libraries (FDLs), established in 1962. It's goal was, and still is, to facilitate access to public records, however, since early 1990-ties, main weight of their activities has shifted from paper to electronic documents [1]. In a survey from 2011 a new digital landscape was described: 82.4% of public libraries reported that providing access to government websites and services is important; 91.8% of them were helping people understand and use government websites; 96.6% - helping people in applying for e-government services; and 70.7% - helping people in completing e-government forms [7]. However, as research done by Information Policy & Access Center shows, there are some common obstacles, which libraries meet in trying to provide access to public information and services: too few workstations to meet patron demand; workstation time limits that do not allow enough time for patrons to complete their e-government forms, seek government information, among others [12].

In Poland, since 2001, when Freedom of Information act was established, we could observe a very irregular growth of e-government. The rise of regional e-services portals and their nation-wide equivalent (ePUAP), the re-do of PESEL registry and, as a result, introduction of new eID, the enhancement of online presence of public offices – all led to bringing Polish public sector to information society. It became important to ensure that people at risk of digital exclusion have appropriate opportunities to enter into relations with the public sector, for example by taking on the mediating functions by the public libraries.

## 2 The Aim and Research Method

The aim of this paper is to present results of a survey on opinions of the librarians on the role of public libraries as intermediaries in access to public information and services. Data collection was executed through a questionnaire, which was subjected to libraries in three voivodeships: Lesser Poland and Świętokrzyskie (these are the provinces of respectively the biggest and the smallest development of Internet access in households) [13], as well as Mazovian Voivodeship (chosen because of its internal differentiation). All municipal and rural-municipal public libraries in these provinces received invitations to participate in the study. Libraries which agreed to participate in the study were asked to complete a questionnaire, available in both paper and electronic form (the suggestion was for the questionnaire to be filled by the most knowledgeable employee). The main objective of the survey was to investigate the possibility of

performing by a given library the role of mediator in access to information and public services.

The survey was divided into 6 sections: (1) Imprint (10 questions concerning the library name, its location, and the area, the number of users and workstations); (2) Familiarity with the e-government (one matrix question); (3) Library and mediation in access to public services (in total 7 questions, including one open); (4) Library and mediation to public information (5 questions, including one open); (5) Library as an institution cooperating with other public institutions (7 questions, including 3 open); (6) Conclusion and closing remarks (1 open question). In addition, each question was accompanied by the field for adding an open comment. Specific questions within each section are discussed in respective sections of this paper.

It is important to clarify, that this paper is based on much broader project, which was financed by the National Science Center Poland, through grant based on the Decision No. DEC-2011/03/D/HS2/01124. Its goal was to analyze all sides of e-government-library-citizens triangle, and relations between them.

### 3 Findings

The study involved a total of 112 libraries from three voivodships (Lesser Poland, Mazovian and Świętokrzyskie), where positive answer to the invitation to participate in the survey was given by respectively 41, 53 and 18 libraries. It should be noted that the rate of return places these three regions somewhat differently: the highest percentage of libraries participating in the study was reported in Lesser Poland voivodeship (21%), followed by Świętokrzyskie (18%) and Mazovian (16%). Interestingly, the survey was filled more willingly by the libraries located in small towns - 50 of them came from the place with the population up to 5 thousand, the next 38 - from 5 to 20 thousand. This gives a bit more than 78.5%.

#### 3.1 Library Staff and Their Knowledge of e-Government

One of the key aspects of the mediation by the public libraries in access to information and public services is to hire staff with appropriate knowledge and skills in this area. In response to the question on how the representatives of libraries assess their knowledge on e-government the largest part of them (47) said that it is poor. When we take into account the 18 answers "I know from hearsay" and 1 indicating "I do not know what it is", it turns out that respondents from almost 59% of libraries declare lack of adequate preparation substantive to perform such a function. It should also be noted, that this question, as well as another in this part of the questionnaire lead the respondents to make kind of self-evaluation, which as shown by the experience of all studies of this type usually leads to overestimating the percentage of declarations that the respondents see as more positive. For a better understanding of the phenomenon, we applied here two solutions of verification.

Firstly, in the above question the term "e-administration" was used, instead of "e-government". It seems that in the Polish language usage, especially outside big

cities, “e-government” (no equivalent in Polish) could be an unfamiliar term. Moreover, the understanding of the term “e-administration” (*e-administracja*) with a minimum knowledge of new technologies can be deduced on the basis of other words that begin with the prefix “e-” (e.g. e-mail).

Secondly, a series of control questions were used, which allowed to verify self-general esteem declared by the respondents. The first question in this group was the question on the familiarity of the e-PUAP platform. It is a solution that is fundamental for the functioning of the system of electronic public services in Poland. Available from 2010, the e-PUAP is (or - eventually should be) an integrated access point to all the information and public services in Poland. Meanwhile, 42 libraries declared good knowledge of e-administration, but only 28 equally good knowledge of the e-PUAP. At the same time, as many as in 19 cases the answer “I do not know what it is” was given. It seems that the declared level of librarians’ knowledge concerning e-administration exceeds reality.

Another form of integrated access to public e-services are regional portals, created since 2002 under the joint strategy “Gates of Poland” (*Wrota Polski*). In comparison to the e-PUAP platform, knowledge on these portals should be much more widespread. And indeed, in relation to the declarations obtained in respect of the e-PUAP platform, in the structure of responses to regional portals we can see a slight shift to declarations indicating somewhat greater level of knowledge. Interestingly, one library more than in the previous two questions, declared here a very good knowledge of the issue. This may indicate that in this library there is an employee who for some reason is particularly associated with the portal.

Finally, the last important issue in the context of access to public services which we asked for, is familiarity with the so-called trusted profile. Information about it can be found at the starting site of the e-PUAP platform. As it can be read, it is a free mobile electronic signature, which should be used while using electronic services. After creating an account on the platform it is necessary to submit a request for profile confirmation. Then, you have to go to the nearest public office with the identity document, or in some cases - login through bank account. In practice without a trusted profile you cannot effectively use the e-PUAP platform. So it is an informative verification question, which shows the actual knowledge of the respondents. And so, as long as respondents from 28 libraries declared good knowledge of the e-PUAP, for the trusted profile there were only respondents from 20 libraries. The majority (respondents from 41 libraries) declared poor knowledge. There may be several reasons for such results. Firstly, the respondents could be considered “familiarity” as familiarity with the applied computer solutions. Secondly, declarations of the knowledge in the field of the e-PUAP platform could be overstated.

The Freedom of Information act is the main piece of legislation defining the rules concerning access to information which are being the responsibility of the public sector institutions, including public libraries. The declarations of knowledge of librarians in the case of this issue were much higher than in the case of public services. Interestingly, 10 respondents indicated that “I know from hearsay” and one – “I do not know what it is”. Taking into account that the act dates back to 2001 and it regulates the important area of accessing information, it was unexpected.

One of the latest trends in e-administration is a so-called open administration. In Poland, its result is a portal [DanePubliczne.gov.pl](http://DanePubliczne.gov.pl) created on the basis of the amended Freedom of Information Act, which established the rules of reusing public information. It takes the form of the Central Repository of Public Data, created to share data sets from the institutions of public administration. Its aim is to give means for citizens and business to create new solutions, applications and services. This is equivalent to sites such as the British [data.gov.uk](http://data.gov.uk) or the US [www.data.gov](http://www.data.gov). Re-use is indeed not a key issue from the point of view of the information activities of libraries, which explains why the obtained data show the limited interest in this subject among respondents, and above all - no need to update their knowledge in this area.

Another important issues related to e-administration is e-democracy. It covers issues such as e-consultations, e-regulation, or e-voting. They allow the citizens to e-participate in making various kinds of decisions at the central, regional and local levels. Initiatives of this type ensure the transparency of public institutions and give citizens the feeling that their opinion matters. According to the answers of the respondents as many as 33 of them show that they only “hearsay” this issue and 16 declared their ignorance on the subject. However, it seems that such structure of responses is partly due to the use of the term e-democracy. During study visits in selected libraries it turned out that they often use e-questionnaires, which is the simplest form of e-consultation.

### **3.2 Library and Mediation in Access to Public Services**

Strategies for the development of e-government in the European Union refer to a particular set of public services for citizens and business whose level of advancement is used to compare the progress of digitization of public administration since the *eEurope* strategy was published. In the case of services to citizens they are: settlement with the tax office; services offered by employment offices; obtaining social benefits and pensions; obtaining personal documents; vehicle registration; obtaining a building permit, access to library catalogues; reporting to the police; changing the place of residence, services offered by the registry offices and submission of documents to higher education institutions (HEIs). During our study the respondents were asked whether in any of these services they offer assistance in their implementation. The most commonly declared service, as many as 99 times, was access to the catalogues of other libraries. However, taking into account the specific characteristics of library work, it may be surprising that 13 libraries do not offer assistance in this case.

The second indication was the submission of documents for the HEIs - 68 cases, the third - the services offered by employment offices (47 times), then the settlement with the tax office (35) and signing up for a visit to the doctor. In other cases aid is offered sporadically, which can be easily explained by the lower level of their computerization (or even unavailability online). The structure of the replies to this question can also indicate that librarians are more willing to provide assistance in the case of services which probably they had the opportunity to use before (which would explain a surprisingly large number of indications for services related to the submission of

documents to the HEIs). It is also worth noting that 11 libraries are not prepared to provide any assistance for those services.

The surveyed libraries in a much lesser extent declare their readiness to assist in access to public services for entrepreneurs - as many as 76 of them responded "none of the above". Less than one-fifth of the respondents pointed to "submitting data to the statistical office" and "settlement with the tax office". This seems to be completely understandable - in Poland public libraries have little relationships with the business. Therefore, even these few indications should arouse positive surprise.

In the next section of the questionnaire the respondents were asked to indicate the level of interest in the implementation of individual support while realizing services to users of the libraries. It turned out that help is most rarely sought in the case of services such as: building permits (95.5% of responses - not at all), reporting to the police and changing the place of residence (94.6% each); services offered by the registry offices (93.8%), vehicle registration (92.9%) and obtaining social benefits and pensions (90.2%). It is worth noting, however, that these are the services for which the process of computerization was not launched at a time when the study was performed, or it was only possible to obtain forms. At the same time, however, in the case of some services, particularly those that are highly computerized or are particularly important in people's daily lives, the users' interest in assistance provided by librarians was observed. In particular it regards the service of settlement with the tax office - for more than 40% of libraries such inquiry appeared several times a year (the specifics of the service should be noticed- it is carried out only between January and April). This is of course one of the few public services in Poland, which allows the realization fully online in the whole country, without visiting the office. More often (35.7% - several times a year, 21.4% - several times a month, 1.8% - several times a week) the support in dealing with labor offices is sought.

In the case of services for entrepreneurs the indications were much less optimistic. In the vast majority of them this type of question did not appear at all (indications "not at all" on a level above 90%). The only exception occurred to be a service "transmission of statistical data" - 21 libraries received such requests several times a year, while one - several times a month. As it was already written, much less interest in the services for this group of customers is understandable due to the nature of Polish public libraries.

The last question in this part of the questionnaire concerned the main difficulties in mediating of the public libraries in access to information and public services. Indications can be divided into two groups: internal barriers and external barriers. In the first one the most frequently indicated barriers were too small number of employees (84 libraries), insufficient knowledge of workers (62), or financial constraints (59) and housing constraints (46). Interestingly, most rarely indicated answer was insufficient number of computers with Internet access for users, which proves the success of computerization programs implemented for years in Polish libraries. This can be concluded that real barriers may be in (a) the mentality of librarians, (b) external factors. The latter include determinants of demand - a lack of interest on the part of users (77 responses) and relations with the authorities - the perception of libraries as only the lending institution of books (58).

### 3.3 Library and Mediation in Access to Public Information

The fifth part of the questionnaire was devoted to mediation by libraries in access to public information, which can be understood as local information or as presented in the Freedom of Information Act, e.g. in the Public Information Bulletin. As it was written, some indications in this area appeared in the comments of respondents to questions in other parts of the questionnaire. The first question in this section was open and said: "If the library offers help in finding public information online (information provided by public institutions), what information is most commonly of interest to users?" Because it was not an obligatory question, it was completed by only 84 respondents (75%), although in fact it looks a little worse: some entries were "not applicable", "hard to say" or even "I do not know". In the responses most frequently appeared: information on job vacancies and insurance.

In response to a question about whether the library offers help in understanding/interpretation of public information found in the Internet, only 42 times "yes" answer was given. It seems that this is an issue that will require further, in-depth research. On the one hand, such a large number of "no" answers can be explained by the lack of willingness of librarians to take on the responsibility for any consequences resulting from errors of interpretation. On the other hand, one should try to understand what librarians understand by the interpretation. Is finding information on the Internet with the help of library staff (and including the definition of the found answers as relevant) not a form of interpretation?

When the respondents were asked about whether they conduct courses/trainings/workshops facilitating the use of online public services we also achieved a surprisingly small number of positive responses - only 20. Comments added to other questions repeatedly referred to the courses for seniors, computer courses, opening an e-mail account etc. This means that the libraries feel much more confident in the area of spreading computer competences, than in the case of information competences.

### 3.4 Library as an Institution Cooperating with Other Public Institutions

The last group of questions contained in the questionnaire concerned the issues related to the forms of cooperation of public libraries with other public institutions. According to the declarations of the respondents, the most common cooperation covers relations with educational institutions - 90 indications. As the second group they indicated the district offices, municipalities etc. (58), but in this case it is associated with treating by librarians formal and legal relationships with the competent authority as the cooperation. Next non-government organizations (50 times), employment offices (35), district offices (25) and tax offices were indicated. In particular, cooperation with units of employment offices and tax offices here has a positive connotation- the comments from respondents indicate that they are mostly various types of meetings/shifts of representatives of these offices in the library. Among others emerged: centers of culture, municipal social welfare centers, volunteer fire brigade, the house of social assistance. Interestingly, the most common initiators of such cooperation are the libraries themselves. For the question which public institutions offered in the past cooperation, the

most often response was “none of the above.” The comments also make it clear that the librarians usually come with their ideas outside and look for partners for cooperation. Concerning the future cooperation libraries would like to work with employment offices (38 responses), educational institutions (35), district offices (24), and non-government organizations (21).

Finally, on the question whether in the library there are meetings of users with representatives of other public institutions organized, only 39 respondents answered positively. Most often they were representatives of employment offices, municipal offices, tax offices, police and municipal police.

## 4 Conclusions

The conducted study was exploratory and shows, that so far the level of interest of Polish public libraries arranging access to information and public services is very low. However, libraries sometimes do not even know that they serve such activities, and are even a role model of good practice - the case of City Library in Oświęcim, comes to mind. As part of its services was, among others, not only Local Information website, but also radio station, where local news are broadcasted.

In most cases was observed an approach which can be summarized as follows: users do not need it, in the library there is not enough place, no enough employees and there are too serious financial shortages. When we correlate this with visits to libraries, e.g. in London (struggling with exactly the same problems) and libraries, e.g. in French Montpellier (modern, rich, rich in human resources and premises), it turns out that the main factor for engaging libraries in innovative solutions is seeing only the traditional role of the library by all stakeholders: users, librarians and government officials. Only a few try to break common stereotypes in this regard.

Polish Libraries are working on promoting e-inclusion in relation to digital skills and providing access to technology, however are still lacking in helping patrons to access public information and services online. Although they provide explanation to this situation with too small number of employees, insufficient knowledge of workers or financial and housing constraints, in comparison they do not differ that much from American and British Libraries – which allows to assume, that it is more the case of perspective and willingness.

## References

1. Keeping America Informed: The U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C. (2012)
2. Scholl, H.J.: e-Government: information, technology and transformation. In: Scholl, H. J. (ed.) *Electronic Government: A Study Domain Past its Infancy*, pp. 11–32. M.E. Sharpe, Armonk (2010)
3. United Nations e-Government Survey 2016: E-Government in Support of Sustainable Development. Department of Economic and Social Affairs UN, New York (2016)



4. Singh, S., Castelnovo, W.: e-Government: a time for critical reflection and more? In: Singh, S., Castelnovo, W. (eds.) *Leading Issues in e-Government Research*, vol. 2, pp. vii–xv. Academic Conferences and Publishing International Limited, Reading (2015)
5. Oyekunle, R., Akanbi-Ademolake, H.B.: An Overview of e-Government Technological Divide in Developing Countries (2016). [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304954726\\_An\\_overview\\_of\\_e-government\\_technological\\_divide\\_in\\_developing\\_countries](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304954726_An_overview_of_e-government_technological_divide_in_developing_countries)
6. Sahraoui, S.: e-Inclusion as a further stage of e-government? *Transform. Gov. People Process Policy* **1**(1), 44–58 (2007)
7. Bertot, J.C., McDermott, A., Lincoln, R., Real, B., Peterson, K.: 2011–2012 Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey: Survey Findings and Report. Information Policy & Access Center, University of Maryland College Park, College Park (2012)
8. Becker, J., Niehaves, B., Bergener, P., Räckers, M.: Digital divide in Egovernment: the Einclusion gap model. In: Wimmer, M.A., Scholl, H.J., Ferro, E. (eds.) *EGOV 2008. LNCS*, vol. 5184, pp. 231–242. Springer, Heidelberg (2008). doi:[10.1007/978-3-540-85204-9\\_20](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-85204-9_20)
9. Ferro, E., Gil-Garcia, J.R., Helbig, N.: The digital divide metaphor: understanding paths to IT literacy. In: Wimmer, M.A., Scholl, J., Grönlund, Å. (eds.) *EGOV 2007. LNCS*, vol. 4656, pp. 265–280. Springer, Heidelberg (2007). doi:[10.1007/978-3-540-74444-3\\_23](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-74444-3_23)
10. Niehaves, B., Becker, J.: The age-divide in e-government — data, interpretations, theory fragments. In: Oya, M., Uda, R., Yasunobu, C. (eds.) *I3E 2008. ITIFIP*, vol. 286, pp. 279–287. Springer, Boston, MA (2008). doi:[10.1007/978-0-387-85691-9\\_24](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-85691-9_24)
11. Niehaves, B., Gorbacheva, E., Plattfaut, R.: The digital divide vs. the e-government divide: do socio-demographic variables (still) impact e-government use among onliners? In: Gil-Garcia, J.R., (ed.): *e-Government Success Factors and Measures: Theories, Concepts, and Methodologies*, pp. 52–65. IGI Global (2013)
12. Library e-Government and Employment Services and Challenges. Information Policy and Access Center. [http://www.ala.org/research/sites/ala.org.research/files/content/initiatives/plftas/2011\\_2012/egovsvcs-ipac.pdf](http://www.ala.org/research/sites/ala.org.research/files/content/initiatives/plftas/2011_2012/egovsvcs-ipac.pdf)
13. Czapinski, J., Panek, T. (eds.): *Social Diagnosis 2011. Objective and Subjective Quality of Life in Poland*. Contemporary Economics Quarterly of University of Finance and Management in Warsaw, vol. 5, no. 3 (2011)