

Bringing LOGIC to Local Government Information: A Multi-type Partnership to Organize Electronic Local Government Information

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Abstract

Would you like to develop closer partnerships and working relations with public libraries or other jurisdictions in your area? Have you ever wished that there were more efficient methods of collecting, organizing, providing access to and archiving local government information from the cities in your jurisdiction? This paper presents a description of a multi-type partnership of libraries, local jurisdictions, and community organizations working together to develop a method for enhancing the community's access to full-text electronic local government information.

Background

The University of California, Irvine is located in central Orange County, surrounded by high technology firms and in the midst of what is becoming known as the new Gold Coast. Orange County is the third most populous county in California with a well-educated and culturally and ethnically diverse and economically multi-faceted

population. High school graduates constitute more than 82% of the population and more than 26% are college graduates. Approximately 61% of the households have an income of over \$35,000. The Orange County economy is a vigorous one which ranks 33rd in the world. The UCI Libraries is the largest research library in the

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county. The Orange County Library system consists of 27 branches. Seven cities within the county also have city libraries. The public libraries are mostly small and have focused mainly on providing recreational reading. There are several other academic libraries in the county.

The December, 1994 bankruptcy of Orange County had a major effect on the public libraries and resulted in the reduction of hours and staff. Community use of the UCI Libraries proliferated, especially on weekends when UCI was frequently the only library in the county that was open. A survey done by the UCI Libraries in 1995/96 indicated that approximately 70 percent of the weekend users in the Libraries were from the community. Weekday usage by the community averaged about 40 percent. Community users have always constituted a large part of the use statistics of the UCI Library, given the make-up of the county and the lack of other large research libraries. However, the increase in the number of community users that the UCI Libraries experienced during the 1995/96 period was approximately 10 to 15 percent above the previous statistics. Government Information materials in the UCI Libraries which has traditionally seen heavy use by the community experienced a corresponding increase in its statistics.

Recognizing the need for demand management and desiring to develop a stronger partnership between the UCI Libraries and other libraries in Orange County, Shirley Leung and Judy Horn organized a meeting and invited representatives of the Orange County Public Library, Newport Beach Public Library, Santa Ana Public Library, and the Orange County Law Library to attend. As a Federal depository library, UCI has always maintained a strong outreach program in working with the public libraries in the area. With more and more government information appearing on the Internet/WWW, we were seeking ways that UCI could facilitate the use of these electronic resources in the public libraries.

The discussion at this initial meeting focused on how the Internet could be utilized to answer government information questions received by the public libraries. The conversation quickly moved from Federal information on the Internet to the need for better access to information published by Orange County and its cities. The need for better access to local information was identified as the most critical need with which UCI could help facilitate a resolution. The public libraries as well as UCI get numerous requests for reports from Orange County cities that are collected by various libraries in Orange

County. There is no mechanism to determine which library has which report. Libraries tend to send users to the UCI Libraries since they have the most comprehensive collection. Thus, as a result of this conversation, the concept of the Local Online Government Information Center was born.

Attaining a grant for LOGIC

The LOGIC group decided to seek a LSTA grant and a proposal was quickly written with UCI Libraries as the lead agency. The original plan had two main objectives. The first was to develop a prototype of a Local Online Government Information Center with access to full-text Orange County city government information by using the WWW as the vehicle of presentation and access. The second was to explore the feasibility of, and options for expanding and continuing this effort on an ongoing basis to create an electronic archive of full-text local government information to be housed at UCI. In reading our planning grant proposal, the LSTA readers and consultants raised two important issues. They pointed out that the proposal failed to demonstrate the need for this project since numerous libraries had already established links to various local, state, and federal government web sites. They also expressed the view that we should not scan local documents into electronic format since the production of government documents, regardless of format, is a local government responsibility.

We addressed the first concern by developing a table showing that the websites of the Orange County city governments vary considerably in coverage, content and scope. A few of the 31 cities in Orange County have put important documents in full-text on their websites. The majority have only included very general information such as a list of city government agencies and their office hours and other basic information about the city. This led us to realize that we needed to make a better case in explaining the importance of making available and collecting the kind of local government information of a more enduring interest to city planners, analysts, researchers, and the community. We called this type of information "research level" local government information and it was defined to include such documents as annual budgets, general plans, zoning codes and ordinances, building codes, demographic reports, and environmental impact reports.

We felt that the second concern raised by the grant proposal readers stemmed from a more traditional per-

spective with information owned by clearly demarcated sectors. Their attitude showed a lack of understanding of issues related to electronic information and archiving. It was clear from our survey of the city websites that none of the cities had yet begun to archive full-text information on their website. This concern also reminded us that we must make a stronger and clearer case of what we wanted to accomplish and the role that we wished to undertake.

In the successful LOGIC grant proposal, we focused on the development of a conceptual framework and action plan based on user input during the first year of the project. The grant included funding for a consultant whose responsibilities included gathering input from constituent groups through public forums to determine the type of information deemed most important to have full-text coverage, developing a conceptual framework for LOGIC, and producing an action plan for an implementation effort in the next fiscal year with emphasis on ways city government and libraries can work collaboratively on this project. The grant proposal was written by Shirley Leung and Judy Horn with considerable input from the participating libraries.

A Steering Committee to provide overall vision and leadership for the project was established. The Steering Committee included the original representatives from the Orange County Public Library, Orange County Law Library, Newport Beach Public Library, Santa Ana Public Library and UCI with the addition of a representative of the California League of Cities, Orange County Division and the Webmaster for the County of Orange. Day-to-day supervision of the project was provided by the UCI Libraries.

In addition to the representative from the League of California Cities, Orange County Division and the Webmaster for the County of Orange, the Steering Committee decided that it would be advantageous to have a city manager or city council member serve on the group. On the recommendation of the Orange County Librarian, the city manager of one of the cities in central Orange County was invited to serve on the LOGIC Steering Committee. The city manager was enthusiastic about the project and agreed to serve. However, after the grant had been received and we were arranging our first meeting, he decided that he would be unable to participate because of other responsibilities. He appointed the city's personnel analyst to represent him but that person never attended the meetings or participated. Whether the pres-

ence of a representative from a city would have influenced the course of events of this project is, of course, unknown.

Getting LOGIC off the ground

The first item of business for the Steering Committee after receiving the grant for the LOGIC project in October 1997 was to hire a consultant to carry out the work of the project. UCI placed an advertisement in *Western Cities* and on an Internet job site. Four qualified applications were received and the Steering Committee met to interview them. The selection of the successful candidate, RRB Policy Research and Planning, was based on his considerable experience in working with various local jurisdictions. The consultant had formed a project team consisting of the himself and two colleagues. One team member was a fellow consultant who formerly worked for the Orange County Environmental Management Agency, and the second was a web page designer. The time between the receipt of the grant and the hiring of the consultant was 4 months, about 2 months longer than anticipated.

Before the consultant began work, a contract listing scope of the services and tasks to be performed by the consultants was prepared. The various tasks included researching the state of the art of local government information on the Internet/WWW including which cities have full-text information on their sites; developing an online survey form for businesses, community users, libraries and other interested individuals; publicizing the survey as well as the project; meeting with each Orange County city either individually or in groups to gain support for the LOGIC project; ascertaining the perceived benefits of the project, and its potential barriers; holding public forms to provide opportunities for open discussion and input from various users of government information; developing a conceptual LOGIC framework and action plan based on input received from the participants; and creating a LOGIC prototype. In addition, the consultant met with the Board of Directors of the Orange County Council of Governments (OCCOG) and with the OCCOG Technical Advisory Committee to make presentations about the project and to enhance awareness of LOGIC among the city council members, mayors, city managers and city staffs. The League of California Cities, Orange County Division assisted in facilitating the appearance of the consultant before these groups.

During the course of the grant, which concluded in September 1998, the LOGIC Steering Committee and the consultant met regularly to discuss the various phases of the work the consultant had completed and to discuss progress of the project. Two issues frequently discussed were the funding for the next phase and the long-term maintenance of LOGIC. The original plan was to submit a proposal for a second LSTA grant for the 1998/99 cycle but the proposal deadline occurred prior to the hiring of the consultant and the Steering Committee did not feel that they had enough information to prepare a new proposal. Funding for the next steps of this project was of major concern to all members.

The Steering Committee discussed the possibility of securing corporate funding but did not move beyond the discussion stage until the spring of 1998 when Shirley Leung had the opportunity during a dinner occasion to sit next to the Chairman of the Board of a Fortune 500 information management system company headquartered in Orange County. She mentioned the LOGIC project to him and he expressed strong interest in the project. Shortly after, a company staff member contacted Shirley to suggest a demonstration of their system. Several meetings between the staff member, the consultants and the LOGIC Steering Committee followed this demonstration. The Chairman of the Board was so interested in the project that he brought staff who specialized in assisting customers in implementing new systems from the Seattle office to attend a meeting with the consultant and the LOGIC Steering Committee. The company has since undergone restructuring and has suffered a financial downturn, slowing down their involvement in the project. The University Librarian continues to keep in communication with the Chairman who has reiterated his interest in the project.

What we learned from Phase I of the LOGIC Project

The final report from the consultant contains several interesting facts. Among them are:

- Orange County cities and jurisdictions are interested in seeing LOGIC developed. The jurisdictions participating in this project perceived several potential benefits. They see it as a research tool which could result in savings of staff time and resources by providing electronic access to a centralized research document database that they could search for information to determine what other jurisdictions are doing in regards to

a specific issue. They recognize it as a way to respond to public requests for such information without having to produce and maintain a supply of documents for the public. They find it desirable to facilitate enhanced public access to information since research level documents would be available to the public 24 hours a day. Lastly, they see the benefits of saving server space on the city servers for large documents.

- The LOGIC proposal for archiving local government full-text, research quality documents would not duplicate any existing or planned efforts of local jurisdictions/agencies in Orange County.

- The use of the Internet/WWW by local jurisdictions to serve constituents is relatively new. The direction the cities seem to be moving is toward more descriptive and current information about the services offered by their agencies rather than the provision of full-text archival quality documents which would be a "value-added" offering to existing online information on city websites.

- Many cities, even those which have city websites, are not adequately staffed to maintain their own sites, much less participate in the development and maintenance of a centralized LOGIC site. Given this, UCI will need to determine if electronically archiving documents is a service that it wishes to provide to the public as a data collection, information and resource entity

- One of the primary added values of a LOGIC site will be the ability to provide comparative research across several local government documents. This is best achieved with a centralized server and data archives

- Search and downloading capabilities and document protection are critical components to the initial development of the system; ultimate operation and maintenance costs will rise considerably as search functions are expanded, but expanded search functions will probably be most desired by system users

The consultant team recommended that in the next phase the focus should be on those documents that the cities do not currently provide or store on their local sites and documents which cities have indicated an interest in using for comparative research. These initially include:

- General plans
 - Annual budgets
 - Zoning codes and ordinances
 - Building codes
 - Demographic reports

- Fee schedules
- Environmental Impact reports
- “Special” studies conducted by/for local jurisdictions

These documents are not subject to frequent revisions as some are released annually, others are released on a one-time basis or are officially updated infrequently. The consultant team did not recommend the inclusion of information subject to frequent revision since it would be detrimental to the success of the project in the early stages.

The consultant team stressed the need for the LOGIC site to have links to city web pages since the current city information and LOGIC archival information are complementary to one another. Additionally, the consultant team suggested that in the future the cities should have a direct link to the UCI site, providing the cities with the opportunity to update information on both their local site and the centralized archive concurrently. There will be a need for a data management system to allow cities to identify who has authority to alter a document and to track various versions of documents.

What we learned from the Partnership

The partnership effort for the LOGIC grant was also a learning experience for us. Some of the things that we discovered include:

- Local public libraries are interested in partnering with the University library, particularly if the topic is one of sustaining interest to the involved libraries and the community.
- While it is important for all libraries to work together, it is also necessary for one of the libraries to take the lead in submitting the grant proposal and to track the financial information.
- There also needs to be a day-to-day coordinator for the project who is a member of the steering committee, acts as liaison between the consultant and the Steering Committee, establishes meeting times and agendas, and assures that the required reports are submitted on time.
- Regular meetings of those involved in the project are important not only for progress reports but to maintain momentum and interest in the project.
- If possible, tasks should be allocated to the various members of the group as a means of maintaining interest and promoting active involvement in the project.

- Partners take a more active role when they have a strong interest in the project or when the project is tied to their daily responsibilities.

- The larger and more diverse the partnership group, the greater is the need for communication and coordination.

- Partnership activities always take longer than anticipated and they require more work and attention than planned.

- The possibility for partnerships is unlimited. Opportunities arise when least expected and being alert for these possibilities enhances the potential for finding partners for your project.

- Projects of interest or benefit to the local community have the highest potential of attracting corporate partners as well as community interest and partners.

Next steps for LOGIC

After reviewing the report of the consultant and considering the various recommendations, the Steering Committee has submitted a proposal for a second LSTA grant that will be a pilot project with two to four Orange County cities. The proposed grant will fund a web page designer to work with these cities on resolving the technological issues involved in loading full-text files on a server hosted at UCI. As recommended by the consultants, the proposal includes the development of a subject/keyword index to provide access to the files. We also propose to establish links to the LOGIC prototype on the Orange County public libraries and city home pages to widely test the prototype and indexing. As a result of this proposed pilot project, we will be able to collect data that will assist in acquiring, maintaining, and updating the site as well as cost analysis data and information that will assist in expanding the project to include additional Orange County cities. Because of the outreach and publicity work of the consultant in the first phase, the cities in Orange County are familiar with the LOGIC project. Several of them, including the City Manager of one of the largest cities in the county, have already indicated a desire to participate in this pilot project.

We have determined that we need more specific information about technological issues, indexing and file issues, and the amount of time and costs involved before we can proceed with full implementation of this project. It would be an impossible task to work with all

31 Orange County cities at one time. By concentrating our efforts in working with a couple of cities who have some full-text information and some who have not yet added full text information to their website, we hope to acquire the data that we need to fully implement LOGIC. Once we have this information, we will be ready to talk once again with the Chairman of the Board of the Orange County based information technology company. He continues to indicate that he is interested in the project. We will also look for partnership opportunities with other companies in the business of information management systems.

Conclusion

LOGIC began as a multi-type library effort to manage demands on the university Libraries by community users and to develop a strong working relationship with public and special libraries in the area for future partnership collaborations. Unbeknownst to the Steering Committee members when they came up with this idea, the concept of LOGIC is one that many different jurisdictions within the county have long had on their "wish" list. However, no one in these various jurisdictions quite knew how to go about organizing full-text local government information into a single source and bringing such a project to fruition. The LOGIC proposal was greeted enthusiastically by the community and that led to the inclusion of representatives from the League of California Cities, Orange County Division and the County of Orange to the Steering Committee.

The work of the consultant team revealed that the cities in Orange County are not as technologically advanced as it had first been assumed. Few of the cities have the resources to place full-text information on their city websites. Most cities have not yet considered the

need to electronically archive their documents or how this can be done most effectively. A widespread desire exists within the county to have full-text city documents such as general plans, municipal codes, environmental impact statements, annual budgets, and demographic reports available electronically with indexing to provide comparative searches across several jurisdictions. The idea for LOGIC is a solid one but this first phase revealed the difficulties incumbent in working at one time with 31 cities with differing technological capabilities. Hence, in this second grant proposal, we plan to work with a small number of cities (from 2 to 4) to work through the issues of loading full-text documents from these cities on a server and to index these documents so that the user can search for the same or similar data issued by more than one city. The information that we gain from this new pilot project will provide us with detailed data that will assist us in expanding the project to additional cities and in renewing discussions with our possible corporate partner.

We still have a long way to go to fully implement LOGIC. If we obtain the necessary funding the project that will benefit the entire county. This is a project that numerous groups within the county would like to see succeed, though each for a different reason. It is also a project that is a perfect fit for the expertise that librarians can bring to organizing information in an electronic environment. The cities welcome the participation of the libraries in this because they recognize that none of them individually, or even collectively, have the experience or expertise to organize and develop such a body of information. It has been very rewarding to work with the cities, other libraries, county organizations, and our potential corporate partner on this project and we look forward to extending that collaboration as we continue to develop LOGIC.

