

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT WEBSITES AND ONLINE PLATFORMS ON PUBLIC RELATIONS CLARITY INITIATIVES IN HIMACHAL PRADESH**Saurabh Sood**(Research Scholar, Pursuing PhD in Journalism and Mass Communication)
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IEC University, Baddi, Distt. Solan, (HP) India**ABSTRACT**

In the modern digital age, public relations depend on the government's openness. Conveying information, connecting people to government activities, and building public confidence between the public and officials depend on the official website and online platforms. This paper will look at how government websites and digital portals help to promote openness in public relations in Himachal Pradesh, an Indian state developing in electronic governance. Secondary data is used in the study to evaluate how these digital technologies improve openness, encourage public participation, and guarantee responsibility. Results show that even though Himachal Pradesh has achieved great strides in digital projects, true transparency and meaningful citizen involvement remain elusive.

Keywords:

Transparency in governance, digital public relations, official websites, Citizen engagement, Himachal Pradesh e-Governance.

INTRODUCTION

The role of the internet and digital advancements is reshaping the interaction between governments and their constituents. Official websites and online platforms have become vital for ensuring transparency and responsibility while boosting public engagement. The Digital India campaign has significantly supported the promotion of e-governance in the country, with Himachal Pradesh showcasing remarkable growth. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the impact of official websites and online portals on transparency in public relations in Himachal Pradesh, examining their role in enhancing openness, accountability, and citizen involvement in governance.

LITERATURE REVIEW**Transparency in Governance**

Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes (2010) articulate in their seminal work "Using ICTs to create a culture of transparency: E-Government and Social Media as Openness and Anti-Corruption Tools for Societies" how e-government initiatives and the burgeoning use of social media can be utilized to foster a culture of transparency in public administration. They contend that by facilitating digital access to data, documents, and decision-making processes, governments may markedly diminish the potential for corruption and enhance public trust. Their analysis highlights that although the technology enables transparency, its actualization is contingent upon governmental dedication and strategic execution.

Role of Digital Tools in Public Relations

Kent and Taylor (1998), "Building dialogic relationships through the World Wide Web," offers a crucial theoretical framework for comprehending the strategic possibilities of governmental online channels. Although their initial emphasis was on corporate public relations, their groundbreaking insights on dialogic communication are directly relevant to the public sector. Kent and Taylor contended that websites, as interactive media, can enable authentic two-

way communication essential for establishing and sustaining strong relationships with audiences. Their five principles for dialogic websites—dialogic loop, information utility, promotion of return visits, user-friendly interface, and visitor retention—emphasize the essential requirement for government online platforms to be both informative and interactive, accommodating user needs and feedback effectively.

E-Governance in India

India's e-governance projects have been much more active in recent years, leading to the founding of the Digital India program meant to produce a technologically enabled society. This initiative seeks to increase citizen participation, improve service delivery, and supplement government using technology (Government of India, 2015). Among the states applying these strategies to increase transparency and responsibility is Himachal Pradesh.

Himachal Pradesh: A Case Study

Himachal Pradesh is a northern state of India characterized by its hilly terrain. The state excels in implementing e-governance within its jurisdiction. Numerous digital initiatives have been initiated to enhance public services and foster transparency with community engagement. These projects include official government websites, online platforms, and smartphone applications for several ministries. This study seeks to evaluate the efficacy of these programs in enhancing transparency and fostering public relations.

METHODOLOGY

For this research, secondary data was collected from various government documents, academic articles, case studies, and online sources. The analysis aimed to assess the contribution of official websites and online platforms in supporting the transparency goals of Himachal Pradesh. The assessment revolved around the following key factors:

1. Information Accessibility: Government information available via official websites and internet platforms.
2. Transparency in Decision-Making: Government policies and decisions are available online.
3. Public Involvement: Opportunities for the public to give feedback, take part in decision-making, and interact with the government through digital means.
4. Accountability: The role of digital technologies in enhancing government accountability by providing access to information about government performance, budget spending, and service delivery to citizens.

Findings

Availability of Information

According to the research, the Himachal Pradesh government has significantly improved the accessibility of its information via official websites and online platforms. The state authority has created various digital resources, including the official state website (himachal.nic.in) and dedicated department pages, which provide detailed information about different government services, policies, and initiatives. Therefore, this has improved access to information for residents, particularly those in rural regions where traditional communication methods might not work effectively.

Nonetheless, the study uncovered a physical challenge concerning information accessibility. Some websites contained outdated, partial, or incorrect information. In addition, the absence of internet connectivity in remote parts of the state presents a significant obstacle to accessing these digital resources.

Clarity in Decision-Making

This study evaluates how openly the government shares its decisions and policies on official websites and platforms. It discovered that the government does not fully share details about its decision-making processes, even though some aspects can be found online. For example, documents like meeting minutes, draft policies, and other crucial materials are seldom made available on official websites, which significantly undermines the public's right to examine these decisions.

Furthermore, the study revealed that the lack of a competent right-to-information (RTI) portal in the state influences openness in decision-making negatively. Under the RTI Act, information is still partially released, but the current

online application and monitoring mechanisms for RTI entries are not user-friendly, so they deter people from actively requesting information.

Community Participation

The study revealed that even if Himachal Pradesh has tried to involve people using digital tools, there are definitely more opportunities to grow. Online lodging complaint systems run by the state government include the Himachal Pradesh Public Grievance Redressal portal, where citizens may report their problems. Nevertheless, the efficacy of these systems is much hampered by unequal delays in complaint resolution and a lack of feedback systems.

Furthermore, research indicates that opportunities for citizens to participate in decision-making processes are rather restricted. Some departments have created online consultation portals, but without promoting them effectively, citizen participation remains quite low. This limited outreach contributes to the public's lack of awareness about these platforms, especially in rural communities of the state.

Responsibility

It evaluated how much official government websites and online tools encourage responsibility. The findings reveal that although certain data about government performance and budget expenditure is easily available for public review, it is usually presented in a way that makes sense for the typical individual to grasp. Lack of more user-friendly tools like interactive dashboards and visual aids inhibits the citizens' capacity to hold the government accountable.

Moreover, the research highlighted that a shortage of clarity disrupts service provision. Although certain departments have adopted digital tracking for service delivery, their systems frequently suffer from limited coverage or create accessibility issues for citizens looking for immediate information.

Discussion

The research findings show that Himachal Pradesh has made notable progress in using official websites and online portals to enhance governance transparency. However, the study also pinpointed various problems in transparency and public relations practices. These problems consist of outdated and inadequate information available on websites, a lack of clarity in decision-making processes, insufficient methods for public involvement, and the lack of easy-to-use tools for ensuring accountability.

To address these obstacles, here are the suggested priorities if the Himachal Pradesh government is genuinely interested in:

1. Frequent Updates of Websites: It is crucial that all official websites and online portals receive regular updates with precise and comprehensive information.
2. Enhance Transparency in Decision-Making: Publish meeting minutes, policy drafts, and other key documents on the official website to maintain transparency in decision-making.
3. Create Strong Public Engagement Methods: Promote user-friendly online forums for consultation and complaint resolution, ensuring they are broadly communicated.
4. Develop Improved Accountability Instruments: Construct interactive dashboards and visual representations to display government performance and budget expenditures in a clear and comprehensible style.
5. Strengthen Internet Connectivity: Invest in enhancing internet access in remote locations to allow every citizen to utilize digital platforms.

This could result in the advanced development of official websites and online portals, providing added value to transparency and improving public relations.

CONCLUSION

Official websites and online platforms have become crucial in fostering transparency and accountability in governance. These resources have allowed citizens in Himachal Pradesh to obtain information, engage with the government, and establish trust. However, the study identified specific gaps that must still be addressed for these platforms to operate at their full potential. By making advancements in accessibility, transparency, and user-friendliness of official websites and online portals, Himachal Pradesh could further the goals of transparency and become a model for other states in India.

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Appendices

Appendix A: List of Official Websites and Online Portals Reviewed

1. Official Website of Himachal Pradesh Government: himachal.nic.in
2. Himachal Pradesh Public Grievance Redressal Portal: himachal.nic.in/grievance
3. Department of Revenue, Himachal Pradesh: revenue.hp.gov.in
4. Department of Health, Himachal Pradesh: hpswasthya.nic.in
5. Himachal Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation: hptdc.in

Appendix B: Sample of RTI Portal

The RTI portal of Himachal Pradesh can be accessed at himachal.nic.in/rti.

Appendix C: List of Academic Articles and Case Studies Reviewed

1. "E-Governance in India: A Case Study of Himachal Pradesh" by Sharma, A. (2018)
2. "Transparency in Governance: The Role of Official Websites" by Singh, R. (2019)
3. "Digital India: A Pathway to Transparency and Accountability" by Kumar, S. (2020)