An Information Architecture for RTI

Veena Ramanna[1]* and CV Madhukar[2]

ABSTRACT

The Right to Information Act was passed in 2005. It has been given the status of a fundamental right under Article 19(1) of the Constitution. This article guarantees every citizen the right to know how the government works, its functions, and so on. This is seen as a landmark Act and a major shift from the culture of secrecy within the government that has been the norm for decades. In this paper we begin with a look at some of the key clauses in the RTI Act that call for proactive disclosure of information. We analyse the way public authorities have disclosed the information and have leveraged technology in implementing the Act. Finally, we propose an information architecture that will help maximize the information disseminated to citizens.

1. Some Clauses pertaining to disclosure of information in the RTI Act

Under the RTI Act, each public authority is required to appoint Public Information Officers (PIOs). Over and above the public authorities that are subject to the RTI Act, there are State Information Commissions (SIC) and a Central Information Commission (CIC) to oversee the implementation of the Act, including addressing any issues of denial of information. While the Act confers a right to the citizens to demand information, there are a number of clauses in the Act which explicitly outline the mandatory suo-motu disclosure of information to be made by public authorities.

Section 4(1) (b) of the Act details the kinds of information that each public authority needs to disclose. Some illustrative clauses are listed below:

- the particulars of its organisation, functions and duties;
- the powers and duties of its officers and employees;
- the procedure followed in the decision making process, including channels of supervision and accountability;
- the norms set by it for the discharge of its functions;
- the rules, regulations, instructions, manuals and records, held by it or under its control or used by its employees for discharging its functions;
- a statement of the categories of documents that are held by it or under its control;
- the budget allocated to each of its agency, indicating the particulars of all plans, proposed expenditures and reports on disbursements made;
- the manner of execution of subsidy programmes, including the amounts allocated and the details of beneficiaries of such programmes;

The Act also specifies that within 120 days of its passing, public authorities shall publish "details in respect

[1]Veena Ramanna is a technology specialist with a passion for e-governance and is an alumnus of IIT Bombay, India
[2] CV Madhukar was formerly head of technology initiatives at Azim Premji Foundation and is an alumnus of Harvard University.
* *Corresponding Author:* (E-mail : veena.madhukar@gmail.com, Telephone: +91)

of the information, available to or held by it, reduced in an electronic form".

In a bid to emphasise wide and low-cost dissemination of public information, the Act specifically mentions "…provide as much information suo-motu to the public at regular intervals through various means of communications, including internet, so that the public have minimum resort to the use of this Act to obtain information."

As part of the mechanism to ensure proper implementation of the Act, the SICs and CIC are required to at "… the end of each year, prepare a report on the implementation of the provisions of this Act during that year…"

The Act also goes on to specify that each such report shall disclose the following kinds of details:

- the number of requests made to each public authority
- the number of decisions where applicants were not entitled to access to the documents pursuant to the requests
- the number of appeals referred to the Central Information Commission or State Information Commission, as the case may be, for review, the nature of the appeals and the outcome of the appeals
- particulars of any disciplinary action taken against any officer in respect of the administration of this Act.

However, different public authorities have responded unevenly to the letter and spirit of what is contained in the Act. Let us now examine the different ways in which public authorities have responded to the stipulations in the Act.

2. Actual Disclosure of Information by Public Authorities

A look at a cross-section of websites of some public authorities offers some useful insights.

For example, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) website has two links that come up when the RTI link on the homepage is clicked. One of the links reveals the names of the Public Information Officers. The other link opens a PDF file dated October 2005. In the PDF file, the Ministry has listed the disclosure obligations under Sec 4(1)(b) of the Act, and provided answers to several of the questions. In some cases, the document has "not applicable" as the appropriate answer.

The Ministry of Finance has an RTI link on its home page. The link opens into the Government of India's RTI Portal, and not the information to be disclosed as per Sec 4(1)(b) of the Act.

In the case of Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Science and Technology, they have a detailed listing of the information disclosure required under Sec 4(1)(b), but have no information for many of the requirements.

These are just some illustrations of the unevenness of how some public authorities have responded to the disclosure requirements. Needless to say, there is a greater need for harmonisation of the basic disclosures under RTI so that the citizen experience is uniform across all public authorities.

The information disclosure requirements in the RTI Act can be classified broadly into four categories:

- PIO Contact Information: Names and contact information of the Public Information Officers. This information is made available by most public authorities on their websites.
- Categories of Documents: Listing of the kinds of information and documents available with the public authority including the decision making process, manuals and records, details of board

meetings, remuneration towards employees, etc. There is some lack of uniformity in how this information is compiled and presented on the websites.

- Detailed Information: Beyond the listing of the documents, the thrust of the RTI Act is to encourage public authorities to proactively disclose maximum information. This could imply details of budget allocation, programme implementation and performance, not just at the centrally aggregated level but much more detailed information down to block / village level. On this count, there is wide variation with regard to the extent and quality of information presented amongst public authorities.
- RTI Requests Catalog: Public authorities often receive requests from citizens which may be repetitive in nature. If the websites of the public authorities are able to catalog all the RTI requests and to the extent possible, the responses, then the possibility of requests for the same kind of data by different users can be minimized.

The unevenness observed amongst various public authorities can be rectified over time with some concrete action on the part of the SICs and CIC in cooperation with the public authorities. While some of the unevenness can be ironed out by issuing specific guidelines and monitoring the implementation, developing a well thought out and comprehensive information architecture will be essential to systematically address the disclosure deficit.

3. Role of Technology in RTI

It is obvious that technology can be used in multiple ways to enhance the implementation of the RTI Act. In this context it is relevant at this stage to understand the thinking of the person charged with the implementation of RTI Act with regard to the use of technology in strengthening its implementation. In an interview to a leading technology magazine in June 2006, the Chief Information Commissioner, Wajahat Habibullah said the following:

3.1 How relevant is IT in enabling citizens to exercise their information right?

Information Technology is a key tool to ensure that the citizens have access to any relevant information that they seek. Computerisation of records and use of Internet are specified in the Act.

To start with, all offices of government are to have websites with relevant information. Most of the government departments are working towards this. Ministry of panchayati raj is setting up e-panchayats to reach information to the grass root levels. There is continuous effort from department of information technology in spreading the use of IT. Community information centres (CICs) are being set up across the country. The knowledge commission under Sam Pitroda and the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation are also putting in their efforts to disseminate information.

An RTI portal developed by National Informatics Centre (NIC) is also getting ready for the citizens to do quick search of information put up by various government departments.

All said, much more has to be done in ensuring people's access to information, as majority of Indians do not have access to Internet.

3.2 How important is IT for the information commission to simplify its processes?

Going through the archived physical records is a tedious task for the information commission. Digitization of all government documents is very important to address the information needs of citizens. Digitization of records being undertaken by government departments is a key effort in smoothening the process of the commission. Easy access to files will ensure speedy redressal of citizens' grievances with regard to their information rights. Central information commission has set up a website www.cic.gov.in, where all the

information pertaining to the information commission can be accessed by public."
Several efforts have been initiated to leverage technology to enhance the implementation of the RTI Act. We look at some specific instances below:

- Websites of public authorities have been extensively used to disseminate information required under the RTI Act.
- In 2006, the CIC set up a basic version of an RTI-MIS that captures data about PIOs across the country. The website also has made it possible for filing RTI appeals online.
- In January 2007, the Bihar government launched an effort to set up an RTI call centre. The idea was that citizens could call from anywhere in the state and file a complaint in Bhojpuri or Maithili, which would then be translated into Hindi, the state's official language.
- The Chief Information Commissioner has recently suggested the use of video conferencing to address the backlog of appeals and delayed complaints. However, RTI activists have pointed out that video conferencing is still very restrictive because of lack of video equipment in most places. They have recommended the use of 'audio-conferencing' using regular telephones as a mechanism to address this bottleneck.

4. Proposed Information Architecture

Before we discuss the specifics of the proposed information architecture, we describe two essential qualitative elements that will significantly enhance the user experience. These two qualitative elements are critical to any website, and become even more relevant when there is a need to harmonise user experience across multiple websites.

4.1 Ensuring a consistent user experience on all public authority websites

The need for a consistent user experience is a widely recognised aspect in developing user friendly websites and portals. According to the IBM Global Services Report of 2001, if each Agency site looks and feels different from every other one and is organised uniquely, the customer faces a confusing and frustrating hunt for information. No matter how good any individual site may be, if there is no consistency or coherence among the multitude of sites the customer must search, the overall effect is one of complexity and confusion.

Well conceptualised websites in the government and private domains take cognisance of this fact. For example, the Government of Australia has developed a set of parameters to ensure consistency in the user experience across government websites. There are several individual components that constitute a consistent user experience making the standards more than a common look and feel. These are

- visual page layout
- underlying structural page layout (HTML code)
- functionality of each page section
- visual elements: graphics and fonts
- navigation schemes
- terminology and messages

4.2 Characteristics of data

There are several characteristics of data which would be essential to ensure that users get the information they are looking for. We list below some of the main characteristics that would facilitate greater data transparency and utility.

- *Data drilling to any level of aggregation or disaggregation*: Data at various levels of aggregation would be useful for different user groups for various purposes. The ability to seek more or less detail is determined both by the data available and the way it is presented. But the reality is that most government data presented on their websites is in the form of .pdf files at a highly

aggregated level. For example, the programme performance and expenditure details on several ministry websites are contained as .pdf files. This prevents the users from being able to access any further data from the site.

- *Ability to recast data to answer any specific user queries*: A well organized data set can allow users to analyse data across different parameters. Some important data presented in Ministry of Health and Family Welfare is available in a .pdf format at an aggregated level on a limited set of parameters making it difficult for the user to recast data. However, the website of the Reserve Bank of India provides significant amount of economic data both in .pdf and Microsoft Excel formats on a wide range of commonly used parameters.
- *Real time data as much as possible*: There is often a significant time lag from the time government collects data and information, to the time it actually is put up in the public domain. This hampers access to information in a timely manner.
- *Data integrity checks at various levels*: A hallmark of any good information management system is the ability to put in data integrity checks within the system to the extent possible. Greater transparency of data will allow greater usage and thereby point to any data inconsistencies that might have crept in during the collation process.
- *Access protocols clearly defined and executed*: Definition of access protocols requires identification of user groups and clearly defining what aspects of the system could be made available to which specific user groups. The challenge of setting up access protocols is compounded when dealing with large, dispersed government systems.

Having discussed two core tenets – consistency of user experience and characteristics of data -- necessary for the effective implementation of RTI Act, we now move on to discuss some specific actions which would constitute the core of the proposed information architecture.

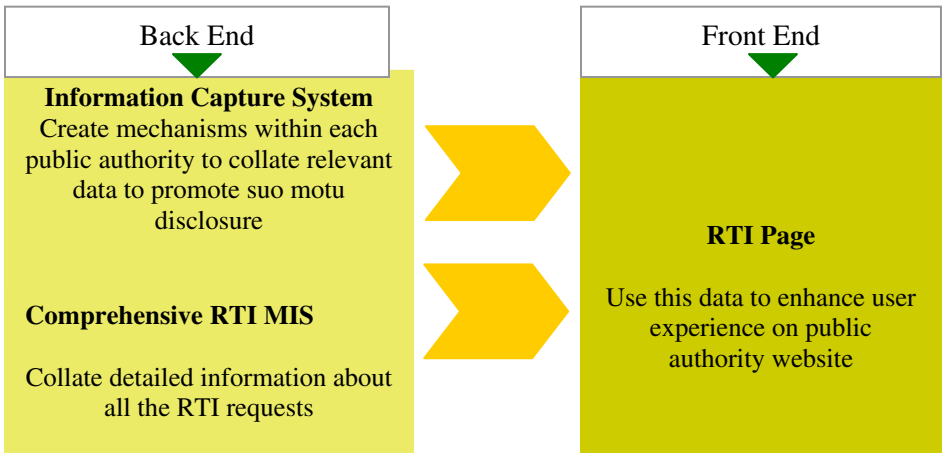

Figure 1: Information Architecture

- **Information Capture System:** The first element in the proposed information architecture is to develop systems of information flows in each public authority that will allow the capture and display of information at various levels of disaggregation. Government programmes usually collect data village-wise and then aggregate them – often in paper format -- at various levels such as block level, district level, state level, etc. A good example of an electronic format for collection of data is the DISE system which is used to collect school education data. The Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana has also taken an important step forward by disclosing a significant amount

of data (such as name of village, contractor who was assigned the task, number of kilometres of road, the expenditure incurred, etc.)

In order to enable systematic capture of such detailed information, at least three things are necessary:

- The availability of hardware and appropriate software applications at various levels within public authorities.
- The availability of connectivity at various levels of public agencies. It is possible to use other forms of transferring data periodically (such as CDs), if there is no internet connectivity available.
- The human capacity/ skills to operationalise the entry of data from local levels across large geographical areas.

Clearly, before the Information Capture System can be made a reality, there is a need to undertake a detailed study on all the three aspects discussed above.

- **Comprehensive RTI MIS:** The second aspect of the proposed information architecture is to develop a comprehensive RTI MIS. The RTI MIS currently available on the CIC has a very limited objective. The Comprehensive RTI MIS should also be designed in a manner so as to make it an integral part of the business process to update the RTI Page (discussed later) of the public authority.

A comprehensive system could mean that every RTI request received anywhere in the country is logged on to this network. Date of receipt of RTI request, subject/ topic, information sought for, officer responsible, date on which information was given to the applicant, and a copy of the actual information given (especially when such information can be easily entered on to a computer), etc.

A well conceptualised Comprehensive RTI MIS should also be directly linked to the RTI Page on each public authority website. This one-to-many mapping (from one comprehensive RTI MIS to many RTI Pages of public authorities) implies that there needs to be a very carefully thought out and implemented set of access protocols for the proposed MIS.

Needless to say, there are important implementation challenges to such a comprehensive RTI MIS. Some of these challenges are well captured in the detailed work done by Prof. Gupta, *et. al* as described in Government Online:

"The architecture should be able to support *phased implementation*, i.e. it should be possible to have a unified approach but still implement the solution in phases. Since government offices number in thousands, and are geographically distributed, it may neither be economical nor technically feasible to roll out the entire system together. Hence the architecture itself needs to be deployable component-wise, having a core structure with peripheral components being added as and when required…"

Additionally, when such data is entered into a national MIS, there are multiple benefits to it, such as:

- It becomes possible to answer a number of questions pertaining to RTI, such as, track which departments are getting the most RTIs, what kinds of questions are being asked, extent of repeat questions, etc.
- The compilation of annual reports as mandated by the RTI Act, by the SICs and CIC become more possible, and real time.
- It would be possible to spot bottlenecks with regard to RTI implantation, and take up necessary interventions.

5. RTI Page

We have already discussed the unevenness in how the information required under the RTI Act is presented across public authorities. In order to provide a consistent user experience and to maximise the information accessible online to users, we suggest the creation of an "RTI Page" on each public authority website.

Earlier in this paper, we have provided four categories under which RTI information can be categorized for the purposes of disclosures on the websites of public authorities.

- PIO Contact Information
- Categories of Documents
- Detailed Information
- RTI Requests Catalog

The RTI Page will be the front end of the proposed information architecture. The information from both the Information Capture System and the Comprehensive RTI MIS feed into the proposed RTI Page.

Additional features can be added to the RTI Page as may be necessary. Indeed, given the complexity of building a massive nationwide system, spread across public authorities at all levels, there is bound to be a need for gradual phasing in of additional features from time to time.

6. Concluding Remarks

The Right to Information Act, 2005, has opened up enormous possibilities with regard to the ability of citizens to access government data. A significant aspect of the Act is that all public authorities are required to disclose maximum information on their own. Sometimes, there is concern expressed about the high volume of information requests that some public authorities receive. It has also been felt that the incentive for the officers is to attend to the RTI applications rather than focus on the regular work they are supposed to complete. They may do this to avoid the monetary fines that are imposed on them if information is not provided within the stipulated 30 days. By far the best way to respond to such concerns is to maximise the information that public authorities voluntarily disclose. We have proposed an information architecture that will enable more effective collation of data and facilitate the voluntary disclosure of information by public authorities. Between proposing information architecture and its actual implementation, a massive effort will be required. It is hoped that this paper will push the dialogue forward on this important issue. We also hope that the public authorities will build on some of these ideas while taking further actions in this regard.

References

1. Extracts of the RTI Act have been brought in at several necessary points in the paper. The text of the RTI Act can be accessed from www.indiacode.gov.in. accessed during May – July 2008
2. Ministry of Human Resource Development website, Government of India (http://education.nic.in/Elementary/rtimainEEL.asp) accessed during May – July 2008
3. Ministry of Finance website, Government of India (http://finmin.nic.in/) accessed during May – July 2008
4. Ministry of Labour website, Government of India (http://labour.nic.in/rti/welcome.html) accessed during May – July 2008
5. Department of Science and Technology website, Government of India (http://dst.gov.in/rti-info/right-information-act.htm) accessed during May – July 2008
6. Interview of Mr. Wajahat Habibullah, Chief Information Commissioner with PCQuest magazine in June 2006: "RTI and E-Governance go hand in hand" (http://www.ciol.com/content/news/2006/106052506.asp) accessed during May – July 2008
7. Central Information Commission website (http://164.100.42.72/rti-mis/) accessed during May – July 2008

8. Project Report on Jaankari, Govt. of Bihar, 2007 (http://cic.gov.in/CIC-Articles/JAANKARI-pdf-26-03-07.pdf) accessed during May – July 2008
9. Video conferencing way to clear backlog: RTI chief, October 5, 2008 (http://in.news.yahoo.com/43/20081005/812/tnl-video-conferencing-way-to-clear-back.html)
10. *The IBM Global Services Report*, 2001
11. Queensland Government website, Australia (http://www.qld.gov.au/web/cue/overview/) accessed during May – July 2008
12. Gupta, MP, et.al (2004), "*Government Online – Opportunities and Challenges*", Tata McGraw Hill, 2006, p.244

About the Authors

Veena Ramanna is an independent researcher. She holds a Masters degree in Mathematics with specialisation in Computer Science from IIT Bombay. She started her professional career more than 12 years ago with Satyam Computer Services and has worked in India and abroad with leading companies. Her most recent assignment as a representative of i-flex, was with the World Bank in Washington DC. Veena has led teams to successfully implement various projects in the IT sector. She is working on a range of issues pertaining to the Right to Information Act and is currently documenting and tracking citizen satisfaction with the hearings of the Central Information Commission.

C V Madhukar is Director of PRS Legislative Research, New Delhi. Madhukar started his professional career as an investment banker with ICICI Securities in Mumbai. He has held senior positions in Pratham, and helped set up Akshara Foundation and Azim Premji Foundation in Bangalore. Prior to setting up PRS, he was with the World Bank in Washington DC. Madhukar is Edward Mason Fellow from Harvard University and holds an MPA from the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, an MBA from the University of Houston and a BE degree from Bangalore University. Madhukar is an Echoing Green Fellow, Ashoka Fellow and Eisenhower Fellow. He was elected Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum in 2008.