

PUBLIC LIBRARIES: AN ALTERNATE TO CICS FOR PROVIDING COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICES IN J&K

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Abstract Jammu and Kashmir is the northernmost state of India. Its large area is mountainous and lacks access to basic facilities like education and information. For providing equitable access to information resources and IT infrastructure, the central and state governments established CICS and public libraries in urban as well as rural areas. In the present article an effort has been made to analyse the present scenario of both institutions, i.e. CICS and public libraries in J&K. During the study, it was found that at one point of time 135 community information centres (CIC) were functional in J&K and were delivering community information services to the needy population of the areas. However, within a short period of time, around a decade, these centres became defunct and ceased to perform their main function of delivering community information services to the public. On the other hand, with the renewed efforts of the state government, large numbers of public libraries came into existence in J&K at the state, district, tehsil, and even at the village level. These libraries have qualified manpower and information resources. The information resources in these libraries mainly consist of books, journals, magazines, and newspapers, with some of them having electronic resources too. However, it was found that most of these libraries were rendering the traditional services like book borrowing, reference services, CAS/SDI services, and reading room facilities. Keeping in view the changing needs of society, as well as changing user behaviour, it has been felt that public libraries in J&K can play a proactive role in delivering community information services (CIS). Before undertaking CIS, however, the public libraries in J&K need to strengthen their resources and redesign their services as per the demands of the population residing in the areas.

Keywords: Public Libraries, Community Information Centre, Community Information Services

INTRODUCTION

The major difference between developed countries and developing countries is about availability of information resources and the means and medium to exploit them. People in developed countries have easy access to information resources and IT infrastructure, whereas people in developing countries, especially those living in rural and far-flung areas, have no or limited access to both, i.e. information resources and IT infrastructure. However, due to globalisation, the whole world is shrinking into a global village where there is an easy interchange of attributes among different societies. Globalisation is the growing integration of various countries to the world economy. The pace of globalisation is increasing day by day and this has become possible with the advancement of ICT, which overcomes the geographic barriers between different parts of the world. ICT makes it possible for the people to interact and communicate beyond the geographic boundaries.

The Internet has made it possible to share information and ideas at an unprecedented pace, overcoming geographical

and time barriers. According to Miller (2000), “The World Wide Web is perhaps the most notable example of a far-reaching element that librarians neither predicted nor planned for. Not available before the early 1990s, but impossible to ignore by the late 1990s, the web offers a kind of watershed in the way libraries and their users connect.” With the further development in ICT, especially mobile technology, the Internet has become a new tool for information sharing among the common people. This accelerated the growth and development of a knowledge society, where human knowledge is a source of power that has been instrumental in ushering astounding changes in society.

However, there is one dark side to IT; it has widened the digital gap between the information poor and information rich societies. Access to information is not universal and it is unevenly distributed. It has led to social and economic polarisation – the rich are growing richer and those who are unable to take advantage of ICT are falling even further behind (Gurstein, 2007; Ndinde, 2014). People with an Internet connection are in a better position to take

informed decisions in their personal day-to-day crises and on professional fronts, compared to those who do not have access to the right information and technology. Despite the ICT revolution in India, rural and urban poor population remain largely untouched by such advances (Dreze & Sen, 2002). The state of J&K has mountainous and difficult terrain; its large area is still inaccessible due to lack of connectivity by roads and other means. Gaps between the rich and poor in these areas are increasing day by day. The main reason behind such a gap is lack of access to basic services like education and information on various issues concerning the common people.

COMMUNITY INFORMATION CENTRES IN J&K

The Government of India set up Community Information Centres (CIC) to create IT base at the grassroots level in North East States and Jammu & Kashmir (Chaudhri & Dash, 2008). These CICs help people avail the benefits of global connectivity through the Internet and also help the state governments to plan for IT-based citizen-centric applications, making government services (e-governance) available through CICs. Under the project, computers, and peripherals, along with VSATs for satellite communication have been placed at designated locations in each block in these states. CICs, with the help of ICT, can significantly create awareness and disseminate information to the local people and enable them to solve their day-to-day problems; with this problem solving ability, they can participate in developmental processes and hence contribute towards a knowledge society. The first state considered, after the north-eastern states, was the state of Jammu & Kashmir, in 2004. This was due to the fact that the barriers for access to the ICT, such as difficult geographical terrain and lack of infrastructure, which were found in the north-eastern states were also an issue in J&K. It was felt that the basic needs of citizens, such as information, education, entertainment, and health services can be addressed through the establishment of Community Information Centres in the state. These centres would serve as a platform for e-governance, e-learning, and IT services, and further help in better implementation of J&K Services Guarantee Act and Right to Information Act implemented by the state of J&K.

Under this project, a total of 135 blocks were covered in the state of J&K. Out of the total CICs, 65 were established in the Jammu division and the rest in the Kashmir division (one centre in each block). Initially, each CIC was provided with two Community Information Centre Operators (CICO) and infrastructure, including one server machine, five client systems, one each of a VSAT, laser printer, and dot matrix printer (either both or one), modem, LAN hub, two UPS (1KVA, 2KVA), and generators (Kaur, 2016). Some centres have scanners and webcams as well.

However, it is disheartening to note that all the CICs operational in J&K ceased their prime function of delivering community information services after they were transferred to the state government and were merged with the Department of Rural Development. The ICT infrastructure is lying unutilised and the manpower is engaged with other functions by the concerned BDOs.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Public libraries are the institutions established by the state for the welfare of the society. These are considered as a treasure house of knowledge as they store and organise information resources for present and future generations. During the early years of public library movements, these were maintained by emperors, scholars, and philanthropists and were accessible only to a few wealthy and influential people. With the passage of time, public libraries spread their boundaries and expanded their area of work by extending resources and services to the lower rung of society, i.e. access to public libraries and its resources percolated to the middle classes. However, now the time has come when the doors of public libraries should be opened for the man with the least economic and social status.

The mandate behind the establishment of public libraries is to serve every member of society, irrespective of their age, caste, colour, creed, or status, with valuable information resources and services. While public libraries in India have been recognised for their potential to be local centres of information and learning for the deprived masses, their current state of disuse and neglect is a major point of concern (Ghosh, 2005). Various authors have recommended community participation in library management in order to make public libraries a hub of community-based information systems. Gill (2001) enumerated a number of services provided by public libraries. Some of them are as follows:

- Providing access to information to all.
- Collecting, individually and cooperatively, information about local community and making it readily available.
- Training people in ICT and its use.
- Guiding users to appropriate information sources.
- Providing opportunity and assistance to the differently abled people to have independent access to information.
- Acting as a gateway to the information world by making it accessible to all, thus helping to bridge the gap between 'information rich' and 'information poor'.

COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICES

The term community information service consists of three words, i.e. community, information, and service, which denotes a system of service where a group of people living

in a particular area is provided with information resources and services required by them for education, employment, healthcare, and so on, necessary to lead a dignified life, as well as for social and economic development. The main focus of CIS is that part of the population which is poor, deprived, and unable to procure and use the latest sources of information.

According to Kempson (1986), there is growing interest in meeting the everyday information needs of ordinary people, who are considered to be socially and economically disadvantaged, and the term used to denote such services is “community information”. In the words of Michael Gurstein, “Community Informatics (CI) is the application of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to enable and empower community processes.” The main objectives of CI are: use of ICT to overcome the digital divide both within and between communities, and to make ICT available to use by the marginalised population for economic development, social justice, and political empowerment using the Internet (Gurstein, 2007, p. 9).

Thus, for providing community information services in rural areas, it is necessary that required ICT infrastructure is made available at the local level, and illiterate people are trained to use IT to access the World Wide Web and the Internet services. Broadly, community information services can be grouped into i) IT education and training, ii) e-mail and Internet access, iii) Information dissemination, iv) Citizen-centric or government-to-citizen (G2C) services, and v) Entertainment and news (Chaudhri & Dash, 2008).

PUBLIC LIBRARIES SCENARIO IN J&K

Jammu & Kashmir is the northern most state of India. It has a vast landscape of mountains, valleys, and plains. For better administration, due to its topography, the state is divided into three main divisions: Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh. These divisions are further sub-divided into districts, tehsils, blocks, and panchayats for delivering services to people at the grassroots level. Like different administrative units, the public library system in Jammu & Kashmir is a four-tier system consisting of public libraries at divisional, district, tehsil, and block levels.

Presently, there are two state central public libraries, 14 district libraries, 58 tehsil libraries, and 50 border block libraries. In addition to these, some small public libraries such as lending depots, shrine libraries, and reading rooms are also available to the public. However, these are not covered under the study as their numbers are low.

Table 1: Manpower in Public Libraries in Jammu and Kashmir

Public Libraries	Division	Number of Libraries	Present Position		Vacant	
			Prof.	Non-Prof.	Prof.	Non-Prof.
State Central Pub. Libraries	Jammu	1	7	5	2	—
	Kashmir	1	6	9	—	—
District Public Libraries	Jammu	6	13	7	5	5
	Kashmir	6	10	5	2	4
	Ladakh	2	1	1	—	1
Tehsil Public Libraries	Jammu	24	17	15	28	22
	Kashmir	32	23	18	30	21
	Ladakh	2	—	1	1	1
Block Libraries	Jammu	17	11	15	29	17
	Kashmir	26	9	16	29	17
	Ladakh	7	3	5	5	5
Lending Depots	Jammu	8	3	5	7	3
Total			103	102	138	96

Table 1 shows that a total of 103 professionals and 102 non-professionals are working in different public libraries in Jammu & Kashmir. State central libraries have a good number of professionals and non-professional staff; however, there is a shortage of both professional and non-professional staff at the district, tehsil, and block libraries. Disparity is more among professional staff, as the number of vacant posts are more than the staff actually working in these libraries

Table 2: Qualification of Professional Staff

Public Libraries	Division	C-Certificate	B. Lib	M. Lib	Ph.D.
State Central Pub. Libraries	Jammu	4	0	3	—
	Kashmir	2	2	2	—
District Public Libraries	Jammu	4	2	8	—
	Kashmir	7	1	2	—
	Ladakh	—	1	—	—
Tehsil Public Libraries	Jammu	14	—	1	1
	Kashmir	18	2	1	—
	Ladakh	—	—	—	—
Block Libraries	Jammu	5	8	—	—
	Kashmir	9	1	—	—
	Ladakh	—	—	—	—
Lending Depots	Jammu	3	—v	—	—
Total (N=103)		68(66%)	17(16.5%)	17(16.5%)	1(1%)

From Table 2 it is evident that out of the 103 total professional staff working in different public libraries of Jammu & Kashmir, 68 have C-certificate, 17 have B.L.I.S, 17 have M.L.I.S, and 1 has a Ph.D.in Library and Information

Science. Thus, it can be inferred that a majority, i.e. 66% staff have a C-certificate, 16.5% each a Bachelor's and a Master's Degree, and only about 1% have a Doctor's Degree.

Table 3: Availability of the Resources in Public Libraries

Public Libraries	Division	Books	Reference	Rare	AVD	Journals	Newspapers	Magazines
Central Public Libraries	Jammu	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Kashmir	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
District Public Libraries	Jammu	Yes	Yes	None	Yes (3)	None	Yes	Yes (5)
	Kashmir	Yes	Yes	Yes (4)	Yes (3)	None	Yes	Yes
	Ladakh	Yes	Yes	Yes (1)	Yes (2)	None	Yes	Yes (2)
Tehsil Public Libraries	Jammu	Yes	Yes (5)	None	Yes (1)	None	Yes	Yes (2)
	Kashmir	Yes	Yes (25)	None	Yes (7)	None	Yes	Yes (11)
	Ladakh	Yes	Yes	None	None	None	Yes	Yes (2)
Block Libraries	Jammu	Yes	Yes (2)	None	None	None	Yes	None
	Kashmir	Yes	Yes (10)	None	Yes (2)	None	Yes	Yes (4)
	Ladakh	Yes	Yes (3)	None	None	None	Yes	Yes (2)
Lending Depots	Jammu	Yes	Yes (2)	None	None	None	Yes	Yes (2)

Public libraries in Jammu & Kashmir have a varied number of different types of information resources. Table 3 shows that two state central public libraries have books (general, reference, and rare), audio-videos, journals, newspapers, and magazines for their readers. However, other libraries at the district, tehsil, and block levels mainly have books of a general nature and newspapers/magazines. Other information resources like audio/videos are available only in

a limited number of libraries. Only five district libraries have rare books, eight have audio-videos, and none of the district libraries have any journals in their collection. Similarly, all tehsil and block libraries have books and newspapers, but other resources are very limited. Audio-videos are available only in eight tehsil and two block libraries; magazines are available in 15 tehsil and six block libraries. None of the tehsil and block libraries have journals in their collections.

Table 4: Types of Services

Public Libraries	Division	R.S	CAS	SDI	Rep.	D.D	INT.	OPAC	CD-ROM	E.R	A/V	OR
Central Public Libraries	Jammu	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Kashmir	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
District Public Libraries	Jammu	Yes	Yes (3)	No	No	No	Yes (5)	No	Yes (6)	Yes (3)	Yes (3)	Yes (4)
	Kashmir	Yes	Yes (3)	No	No	No	Yes (5)	No	Yes (5)	Yes (5)	Yes (5)	No
	Ladakh	Yes	Yes (1)	No	Yes (1)	No	Yes (2)	No	Yes (1)	Yes (1)	No	No
Tehsil Public Libraries	Jammu	Yes (5)	No	No	No	No	3	No	No	No	No	No
	Kashmir	Yes (5)	No	No	No	No	Yes (4)	No	No	No	Yes (6)	No
	Ladakh	Yes (2)	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Block Libraries	Jammu	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
	Kashmir		No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
	Ladakh		No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Lending Depots	Jammu	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No

Table 4 shows that state central public libraries have a wide range of services for users, like: Reference Services, Current Awareness Services (CAS), Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI), Reprographic Services, Internet facilities, and Orientation Programmes. In addition to books (in print

format), these libraries have CD-ROMs, Audio-Videos (A/Vs), and electronic resources for the use of the public. However, the situation is different in other public libraries. As we move from top to bottom in hierarchy, the number of services dwindles. All district libraries have reference

services, seven have CAS, 12 have Internet facilities, 11 have CD-ROM, eight have electronic resources and audio-videos, and only four have provision for orientation programmes.

USER ANALYSIS

For the present study, the researcher received 332 responses in total, from users of different public libraries in rural areas. Out of the 332 respondents, a majority, i.e. 255(76.8%) users were males and 77(23.2%) were females; maximum, i.e. 298(89.8%) users were in the age group 18-30 years, 20(6.0%) were below 18 years, nine (2.7%) were between 31-59 years, and only five (1.5%) were above 60 years. A large number, i.e. 309(93.1%) were students and scholars, 15(4.5%) were service holders, eight (2.4%) were retired persons, and none of the users belonged to the farming, labour, or unemployed category.

The information needs of users, their frequency and purpose of using public libraries, hurdles they face while using the public library, and how they rate different parameters of the library are discussed in the following tables.

Table 5: Information Needs of Users

Category	Jammu	Kashmir	Ladakh	Total	Percentage
Education	18	21	17	56	16.9
Employment opportunities	30	48	16	94	28.3
Farming	12	25	6	43	13
Welfare schemes	42	72	28	142	42.3
Healthcare	13	16	10	39	11.7
Transport	25	30	10	65	19.6
Internet access/Online registration	48	70	42	160	48.2

Table 5 shows that out of 332 respondents, a majority, i.e. 160(48.3%) responded that they need Internet access and assistance with online processing, followed by 142(42.3%) who require information related to various government welfare schemes, 94(28.3%) who require information related to employment opportunities, 65(19.6%) information on transportation (especially railway timings and bookings), and 43(13%) who require the latest information on farming.

Table 6: Purpose of Library Visit

Purpose of Library Visit	Jammu	Kashmir	Ladakh	Total	Percentage
Book Borrowing	21	131	59	211	63.6
Photocopying	1	1	1	3	0.9
Newspapers/Magazines	72	153	47	272	81.9
Study	87	158	69	314	94.6
Get Inf. Regarding Research	8	3	40	51	15.4
Internet Facility	0	0	0	0	0
Reference Material	26	17	8	51	15.4
Exhibition/Meeting	0	1	2	3	0.9

Table 6 indicates that out of the 332 respondents, a maximum, i.e. 314(94.6%) visit the public library for study purposes, 272(81.9%) for reading newspapers/magazines, 211(63.6%) for borrowing books, and 51(15.4%) each for getting additional information regarding their research and consulting reference materials.

Table 7: Hurdles in Library Use

Problems in using Library	Jammu	Kashmir	Ladakh	Total	Percentage
Inadequate staff	21	35	14	70	21.1
Staff not helpful	9	13	11	33	9.9
Staff lack knowledge	6	9	5	20	6.0
Library is too far	20	3	50	73	22.0
Lack of services	62	26	12	100	30.1
No ICT	52	65	18	135	40.7

Users face various problems in accessing public libraries. Table 7 shows that out of the 332 users, a maximum, i.e. 135(40.7%) users opined that lack of ICT was a major problem, 100(30.1%) stated that libraries did not have the required services, 70(21.1%) declared that there were inadequate staff, and 73(22%) stated that the library was too far. These were some of the problems users faced in accessing public libraries.

Table 8: Rating of Services and Facilities of Library

Facilities and Services	Rating	Jammu	Kashmir	Ladakh	Total	Percentage
Seating Capacity	Satisfied	30	45	20	95	28.6
	Not Satisfied	73	113	51	237	71.4
Furniture	Satisfied	28	57	50	135	40.7
	Not Satisfied	75	101	21	197	59.3
Photocopying Facility	Satisfied	5	2	14	21	6.3
	Not Satisfied	98	156	57	311	93.7
CAS/SDI	Satisfied	28	13	17	58	17.5
	Not Satisfied	75	145	54	274	82.5
Computers	Satisfied	28	48	6	82	24.7
	Not Satisfied	75	110	65	250	75.3
E-Books, Audio, Video	Satisfied	46	43	26	115	34.6
	Not Satisfied	57	115	45	217	65.4
Newspapers/Magazines	Satisfied	92	151	68	311	93.7
	Not Satisfied	11	7	3	21	6.3

In this part of the study the users were asked to evaluate different services and facilities of their public libraries on a scale of two, i.e. satisfactory or not satisfactory. The study found that 71.4% of users were not satisfied with the seating capacity of their libraries and only 28.6% were satisfied with the same. Similarly, for availability of adequate furniture, 59.6% users were not satisfied and 40.7% were satisfied with the present arrangements in their libraries. With respect to availability of computers, 75.3% users were not satisfied and only 24.7% were satisfied.

For different public services, Table 8 shows that a majority of the users were not satisfied with reprography (93.7%) and CAS/SDI services (82.5%) offered by the public libraries.

However, in terms of availability of newspapers/magazines, a majority of the users were satisfied. Table 8 shows that the highest percentage, i.e. 93.7% of users were satisfied with the current availability of newspapers/magazines in the public libraries and the number of users not satisfied with the same were few.

CONCLUSION

A large population of J&K is residing in rural and remote areas. These areas still lack access to information and required infrastructure in the field of social welfare, employment, transportation, and so on, necessary for dignified living. There is a digital divide within and between communities, and between urban and rural areas. The Government of India established 132 CICs in J&K, one in each development block, for developing IT infrastructure and providing training to people living in rural areas, to empower them to benefit from digital India and e-governance services. Unfortunately, these CICs stop functioning very soon.

The public library system is a main organisation working in the state of J&K in the field of information dissemination. A good network of public libraries has opened up in the state till now. As on date, the Directorate of Public Libraries & Research in J&K is running 136 libraries of different levels at different locations in the state. Out of these, 56 public libraries in the Jammu province and 80 public libraries in the Kashmir province are operational. From the analysis, it is evident that only state central public libraries have a good number of professionals and non-professionals, whereas all the other public libraries lack manpower (both professional and non-professional). Around 66% of its professional staff have a C-certificate, 16.5% have B.L.I.S., 16.5% M.L.I.S., and only 1% hold a Ph.D. State central public libraries have books (general, reference, and rare), audio-videos, journals, newspapers, and magazines for their readers. However, other libraries at the district, tehsil, and block level mainly have books of a general nature and newspapers/magazines. Other information resources like audio/videos are available only in a limited number of libraries. Thus, one can say that a majority of the library professionals working in various public libraries of J&K have basic knowledge in information dissemination.

Regarding information needs, 160(48.3%) users responded that they need Internet access and assistance in online processing, followed by 142(42.3%), who require information related to various government welfare schemes, 94(28.3%) require information related to employment opportunities, 65(19.6%) require information for transportation (especially railway timings and bookings), and 43(13%) want the latest information on farming. In practice, users visit the library for different purposes. Analysis shows that 314(94.6%) of users visit the public library for study purposes, 272(81.9%) for reading newspapers/magazines,

211(63.6%) for borrowing books, and 51(15.4%) each for getting additional information regarding their research and consulting reference materials.

Still, the resources of public libraries are not being utilised, as expected, by people in J&K, mainly due to the lack of adequate infrastructure, especially in terms of ICT. The study found that 135(40.7%) users opined that lack of ICT was the main problem, 100(30.1%) observed that the libraries did not have the required services, 70(21.1%) suggested inadequate staff, and 73(22%) declared that the library was too far.

Therefore, under prevailing conditions, where there is disparity in access to information and technology among communities, and where CICs are not functioning properly, public libraries are rays of hope. The public libraries can play an important role in providing community information services in the fields of IT training, Government to Citizen (G2C) services, Business to Citizen (B2C) services, healthcare, employment opportunities, local cultivation, and so on, particularly in rural and remote areas. However, to start new services, the public libraries need to reorganise their resources and strategies. They need strengthening of their manpower, sufficient and continuous sources of finance, and technological and strategic support from state agencies. To start new services, public libraries need to revisit their traditional way of library management and strengthen their 5M (money, manpower, material, machine, and management).

Money

Finance is required to establish and operate public libraries, since they are service agencies that provide information services free of cost. As such, to survive and initiate new services, libraries need to negotiate with the centre and state government, NGOs, and international agencies to ensure continuous funding for the long term.

Manpower

Adequate manpower with requisite knowledge and skills plays an important role in the management of public libraries. Presently, state central libraries have qualified staff, but there are discrepancies in a majority of the district and other libraries. Therefore, there is a dire need to recruit sufficient professional staff.

Material

Public libraries must develop its collection of content according to the information needs of its clientele. In addition to books and other reading materials in print format, the public libraries should collect and arrange information in

electronic formats. The collection containing local history and culture in local languages should be encouraged. Regarding reading and information material, most of the public libraries have sufficient volumes to cater to the need of communities they serve; they will be in a better position if they enrich their collection with e-resources.

Machine

In order to perform various activities in an efficient manner, public libraries need computers, Internet facilities, and allied technologies. This is the area where public libraries in J&K need special assistance from funding agencies. Each and every public library must be provided with at least three computers, a server, VSAT, printer, and generator. These are a prerequisite for starting community information services.

Management

For starting community information services, public libraries need to reorganise their sections and activities. A new section with sufficient staff and IT technology must be established within the public library setup to achieve the mission of community information services. This section must prepare the profile of communities residing in their territory to ascertain their information needs and develop the services in the language and format that suits them the most.

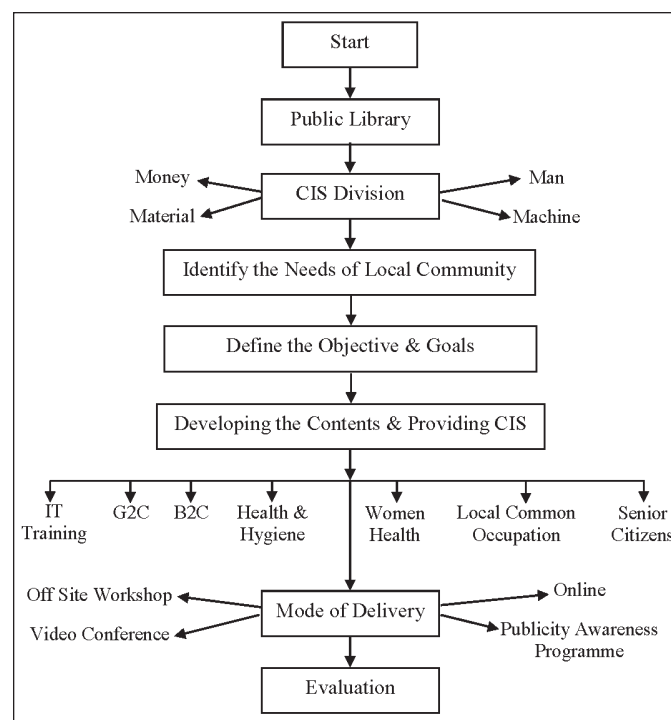


Fig. 1: A Suggested Plan for Providing CIS by Public Libraries

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