EDITORIAL PREFACE

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In the relatively short time that I have been editor-in-chief of IJEGR, I have reviewed something in the order of 140 manuscripts that have been submitted to the journal. In my capacity as a scholar who is active in the area of electronic government, I have attended a number of conferences on this subject over the past few years as well. To say that the scholarship about e-government is wide ranging and varied would be an understatement. It is also a scholarship that is “developing.” As Ake Gronlund (2005) has demonstrated about conference papers and as Ben Lloyd and I (2004) have found about papers in refereed journals, much of the scholarship about e-government lacks the theoretical depth and scholarly rigor that we come to take for granted in more established fields. I also see evidence of this in the papers that I (and our peer reviewers) review for the IJEGR. This should not be surprising as e-government is a nascent field, growing and, I believe, strengthening as well.

As wide ranging as e-government research is, however, two important areas within it remain virtually untouched by scholars. The first is citizen demand for and uptake of e-government. The second is the actual evaluation of various e-government offerings and applications.

Much is presumed about citizen demand and uptake in the popular and advocacy literature and even in some of the more academic writings — and nearly all of the presumptions are positive. These presumptions would, for example, lead one to believe that e-government is coming about because citizens are demanding it. Unfortunately, there are precious few (if any) studies that actually examine what is driving the adoption of e-government and fewer still that endeavor to understand whether or to what extent citizens are pressing their governments for electronic access to governmental information, services, transactions, and participation.

My own research and the anecdotal evidence I have seen indicate that there is
very little citizen demand for e-government (Norris, 2005; Coleman & Norris, 2005). Rather, it appears that the following have been the principal factors resulting in e-government adoption: the availability of the technology to enable e-government, the professional norms of IT department staff and other professional governmental administrators, top down decisions by top governmental administrators and occasionally elected officials, and finally, in a few countries, decisions by sitting governments to use e-government as part of a reform agenda. However, in the absence of more systematic studies, it is hard to know with certainty what has produced the widespread diffusion of e-government and whether citizen demand was among the driving forces behind it.

What about citizen uptake? Again there have been few studies about what happens once an e-government application has been rolled out. The thinking (wishful or not) about e-government applications seems to be one of “If we build it, they will come.” But, do they? Few governments do much more than track hits on their Web sites, and by itself this tells us very little. And, few if any scholarly studies of uptake have been published.

The same is largely true of studies of the efficacy or impacts of e-government. Few governments conduct cost-benefit analyses or any kind of research after an application is implemented, and few if any scholarly studies have been conducted about e-government impacts. Without more research here, we cannot know whether the investments in e-government applications are worth their cost and whether they are paying off in other ways (e.g., moving contacts between citizens and government from in-line to online).

All of this suggests to me that these areas are ripe for empirical research using a variety of appropriate methodologies (surveys, case studies, cost-benefit analyses, focus groups, analyses of large data sets, etc.). Questions might include: What is the extent, if any, of citizen demand for e-government? What factors affect citizen demand (e.g., age, income, education, gender, broadband access, prior computer use, region of the country, the nation itself, etc.)? Likewise, what is the extent of citizen uptake of e-government? Does it vary by application? What other factors affect uptake? What are the actual impacts of e-government, within governmental organizations, on citizens, on businesses, etc.? Is e-government efficacious (however we may define efficacy)? What factors affect efficacy?

Hopefully, what I have outlined here may prompt researchers who have completed studies in these areas to think about submitting their works to IJEGR. It may also stimulate others to undertake research in these areas anew.

Now to the contents of the current issue of IJEGR. The first paper is by Pippa Norris of the Kennedy School at Harvard University and John Curtice of Strathclyde University in Scotland, and is entitled If You Build a Political Web Site, Will They Come? The Internet and Political Activism in Britain. In their paper, they examined the capacity of the Internet for strengthening political activism. First, they examine theories about how “knowledge societies” could affect civic engagement, including political participation. However, they move beyond the principal theories to take the view that political activism is multidimensional and includes various forms (e.g., voting, campaigning, and cause- and civic-oriented ac-
tivities). They then argue against the view that the Internet will radically alter or replace traditional forms of democratic participation or that the digital divide will result in will do no more than reinforce the status quo.

Their source of data for this study is the 2003 survey of British Social Attitudes that included interviews with over 3000 randomly selected persons in Britain. Norris and Curtice’s principal conclusion is that “the potential impact of the Internet on democratic participation depends heavily on the type of activism under consideration.” Different populations are associated with different forms of participation with some (e.g., the online population) being more likely to participate in cause-oriented activism.

Next is a paper by Chan-Gon Kim and Marc Holzer of Rutgers University - Newark, entitled *Public Administrators’ Acceptance of the Practice of Digital Democracy: A Model Explaining the Utilization of Online Policy Forums in South Korea*. Their concern is with factors that affect public officials “acceptance of the practice of digital democracy through their intentions to use online forums on official government Web sites.” They hypothesize that both individual and organizational factors plus system factors will influence officials’ intentions here.

Their data are from a survey conducted in 2005 of over 1,000 public officials from the central government (300) and upper level (320) and lower level (390) local governments in Korea. Their principal findings are that perceived usefulness is the most important factor influencing these officials’ intentions to use online forums. They report several other findings as well, including those regarding the relationship between officials’ attitudes toward public participation, the quality of information on online forums, the perceived use of use of online forums and officials’ intentions to use online forums and others.

The final paper is a “Report from the Field” by Jeremy Millard that presents findings from a survey of 10,000 households in 10 European countries. The survey examined citizen behavior and attitudes regarding governmental services, particularly electronic services, in a variety of areas. Among Millard’s more interesting findings is the fact that the vast majority of respondents (81%) contacted government in person, and only 11% reported using the Internet to access governmental services — so much for citizen uptake of e-government! Well, not exactly, for as Millard notes, the potential demand for e-services “is about 50% and could be higher.” The report also examines, among other things, differences in usage patterns and levels of satisfaction with e-services across the 10 nations.

I am pleased to have these three works to publish in this issue of the *IJEGR*.

REFERENCES


IJEGR Editor-in-Chief Donald F. Norris is director of the Maryland Institute for Policy Analysis and Research (MIPAR) and professor of public policy at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). He is a specialist in public management, urban affairs, and the application, uses, and impacts of information technology (including e-government) in public organizations. He holds a BS in history from the University of Memphis and both an MA and a PhD in government from the University of Virginia.