Considerable hype surrounds e-government and e-government research. Much of the hype is promulgated by e-government advocates and by scholars and researchers, who should have known better, but who appear to have gotten caught up in the advocacy around e-government. The first chapter in this book should go a long way toward dispelling the notion that e-government is somehow special or has special properties to advance a governmental reform agenda or to produce unquestionably positive outcomes.

The first and, to my mind, most important chapter in this book, was authored by Ken Kraemer and John King, two of the most prominent names in the study of information technology (IT) and government. Through an extensive review of literature on IT and government, Kraemer and King examine whether IT has been an instrument of administrative reform in the U.S.

They conclude that this has not been the case in the history of IT and government in the U.S. Indeed, instead of being an instrument of reform, IT has served the interests of those in power and has supported existing administrative and political structures and arrangements. Kraemer and King conclude by questioning whether this finding from the history of IT and government might not have application to e-government, notwithstanding claims to the contrary. As a result, they are properly skeptical that e-government adoption will produce governmental reform any more than IT adoption did previously.

In the second chapter, my colleague Ben Lloyd and I examine the empirical research on e-government published in refereed journals through the end of 2004. We cast a very wide net, using several search engines and databases to find articles in refereed journals which employed some form of empirical methodology or which examined empirical data.

We examined these articles using several criteria and concluded that, for the most part, the published research on e-government is neither particularly vast nor very good. Most articles were published in less than stellar journals, used less than rigorous methodologies, addressed or tried to advance theory, developed or formally tested hypotheses, included acceptable literature reviews, or stayed with their data when drawing conclusions. We concluded by expressing our hope that e-government research in the near future would improve in quality and sophistication.

Chapter III presents another paper based on a literature review, but its purpose is different from the review conducted by Kraemer and King. Ryad Titah and Henri Barki reviewed 75 articles related to e-government adoption and acceptance published between 1990 and
2007 in leading academic journals and conference proceedings. Contrary to earlier studies, they found work that demonstrated a wider array of research methods, conceptual perspectives, and findings, all pointing to “fairly considerable diversity in the topics, constructs and interrelationships considered by different studies.” Based on their review, they proposed a research framework for the complex interdependencies and interactions between organizational, managerial, technical, political, and individual factors that were found by past research to influence e-government adoption and acceptance.

Chapter IV shifts focus to Web surveys. Here, Tony Carrizales, Marc Holzer, and Aroon Manoharan present findings from a 2005 survey of the Web sites of large municipalities worldwide. In particular, they examined the following features of these Web sites: security, usability, content, online services, and citizen participation. The top performing cities, based on this analysis, were Seoul, New York, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Sydney. The authors found very few differences between the 2005 and 2003 surveys, but did find—not surprisingly—that the digital divide between developed and lesser developed nations continues.

In Chapter V, Lawrence Pratchett, Melvin Wingfield, and Rabia Karakaya Polat present findings from their study of local government Web sites in England and Wales with particular attention to the potential of these sites to deliver e-democracy. They found that local governments are providing many features on their Web sites that can facilitate e-democracy. However, for the most part, local governments in England and Wales have not tapped the full potential of the Internet to deliver e-democracy and that there is considerable variation among local governments in their delivery of e-democracy.

Genie N. L. Stowers’ examination of user help and navigation features on Web sites is Chapter VI. Stowers’ sample included a large number of federal government sites, all 50 states, and cities over 100,000. She found patterns across governments of help and navigation features, leading her to conclude that these features had diffused rather well within the public sector. However, she concluded that all was not well in Web land and that Web developers should work to install features on Web sites to assist users in finding information more easily.

In Chapter VII, Sangmi Chai, T. C. Herath, I. Park, and H. R. Rao examine data from a survey of adult Americans conducted by the PEW Research Center. They were interested in learning what motivated users of governmental Web sites to make return visits to those sites. They hypothesized that several factors including the users’ satisfaction, perceived performance of the site, and whether sites ask users for confidential information would affect the intention to return. They also hypothesized that gender and race will play moderating roles on continuation intentions. They found that, indeed, a user’s intention to return was affected by the user’s satisfaction with the Web site, perceived performance of the site, the requirement for confidential information, and that both gender and race had moderating effects on intentions of repeated use.

Our focus now shifts away from Web site analysis to three chapters that look at the use of the Internet for political activism, citizen engagement, and civic deliberation. Chapter VIII features an analysis of political activism in Britain by Pippa Norris and John Curtice. Their chapter is also noteworthy because it nicely summarizes the current debate about the potential of the Internet for strengthening political activism. Drawing on data from the British Social Attitudes Survey from 2003, Norris and Curtice find, first, that political activism via the Internet is not as simple as it sounds. Different types of political activism are associated with different segments of the population, for example. Moreover, they found that the online population is likely to engage in forms of political activism (e.g., more cause oriented) that are quite different from more traditional forms (e.g., campaign activities).
In Chapter IX, Yu-Che Chen and Daniela V. Dimitrova provide an exploratory study of civic engagement via governmental Web sites. They used a sample of Internet users to examine both the demand and supply sides (availability of governmental Web sites) of civic engagement. Their findings highlight the importance of the supply side for promoting civic engagement. Additionally, Chen and Dimitrova found several factors associated with online civic engagement, particularly including perceived benefits and off-line political activism.

Laurence Monnoyer-Smith provides Chapter VIII. Her exploratory study examines the online participation of French citizens in a public debate in 2001 held by the French National Public Debate Commission over the issue of the location of a third international Parisian airport. Although online participation was limited, Monnoyer-Smith believes that this example shows the added value that Internet participation can provide. Here, she argues, it widened the profile of participation and expanded the nature of participants’ arguments and their means of expression.

In Chapter XI, Jeremy Millard examines the attitudes and behavior of European users to e-government citizen services. The study comes from the 2005 eUSER project that surveyed 10,000 households in 10 European Union member states. Although there were variations in the findings based on nation of residence, Millard found that face-to-face contact remains the predominant mode of interacting with government in most countries. In the UK, telephone and mail have surpassed face-to-face contact. However, the evidence is also strong that e-government users also continue to make high use of all other channels. They are “flexi-channellers.” Also, over 40% of e-government users act as social intermediaries using online services on behalf of an average of 2.4 members of their family or friends, and even higher numbers in the new member states of the EU where infrastructures and e-services are not so well rolled-out, so the impact of e-government is wider than first appearances. Millard’s study also identified a number of reported barriers to citizen use of e-government. But, those barriers diminish somewhat after users begin accessing governmental information and services online.

Chapter XII moves from citizen use of the Internet to use by public officials. Here, Chan-Go Kim and Marc Holzer examine data from a survey of 895 public officials in Korea about their intentions to use online policy forums to inform their decision making. They examined individual and organizational factors and system characteristics. Their analysis indicates that three variables were related to public officials’ intentions to use online forums. These were perceived usefulness, the officials’ attitudes toward citizen participation, and information quality.

Chapter XIII constitutes another shift in focus for this volume. In this chapter, Julianne Mahler and Priscilla Regan examine what has become known as Web governance, which they argue is “concerned with the control and content for agency Web sites.” In this study, they trace the history of efforts by Congress and OMB to specify Web site content rules, track the evolution of interagency groups that developed the rules, and examine agency activities to create Web governance procedures. They found that the process of developing Web governance was decentralized and collaborative. Although there were guidelines, they were hardly demanding about either format or content. Moreover, within agencies studies, the process reflected “business as usual.” However, this situation was different in interagency settings where there was more networking and collaboration. Perhaps one important reason for these findings is that OMB did not impose its will on federal agencies. This allowed agency practitioners in both organized forums and in informal interactions to develop the guidelines for Web governance. According
to Mahler and Regan, this represents a paradigm shift in the way that the federal government goes about developing such guidelines.

In Chapter XIV, Mila Gasco and Jeffrey Roy compare e-government in Catalonia, Spain and Ontario, Canada. In particular, they examine the impacts of e-government both on administration and democracy in complex multilevel governmental environments. Both Catalonia and Ontario were known as having invested aggressively in e-government and in both jurisdictions and that e-government was consciously used as an agent of governmental reform. After reviewing the evolution of e-government in both subnational jurisdictions, they conclude that the evidence “tempers the view that e-government will immediately and radically transform the public sector.” In both Ontario and Catalonia, e-services predominated over e-democracy.

Mack C. Shelley, Lisa E. Thrane, and Stuart W. Shulman study generational differences in IT use and political involvement in our final chapter, Chapter XV. Here they examine data from a 2003 survey of adults in three American states. They found profound generational differences with respect to IT and to use of IT in political activities. For example, younger respondents were more favorably inclined toward IT and more likely to desire public IT and e-participation. They conclude by noting that “e-citizenry will compound existing societal divisions” in which those favorably disposed to IT will be advantaged and those not favorably disposed will be disadvantaged.

As is clear from these chapters, e-government is still in its formative years. Its evolution is far from complete. As a result, researchers should continue to examine e-government from a variety of perspectives, using a variety of research methodologies. They should also engage in comparative analysis in order to understand what is occurring with respect to e-government around the globe.