Foreword

The book, which you are looking at, presents an impressive account and a great collection of recent electronic government case studies, research reports, and practice examples from around the world, which nicely confirm that electronic government has grown out of its infancy and into a pervasive phenomenon in governmental practice around the world. This tendency is echoed in a growing number of studies in academic research on the subject: In 2012 the number of peer-reviewed academic publications in the English language alone has grown by almost 20 percent. So, the field of practice and the academic study domain both appear to be blossoming. However, does that necessarily mean that electronic government is a success story? And what is electronic government about in the first place?

I have always held that the combination of the two terms “electronic” and “government” is a misnomer with no academic merit or precision, but rather an embarrassing label created by the trade press that breathes the air of the 1990s. So, why do we still care? The crux with the unscientific term of “electronic government” is that it has been enshrined into legal language and into law, for example, in the federal Electronic Government Act of 2002 in the US. With such sanctioning, the term has morphed from a misnomer into an official term of legal authority. Moreover, it became a widely accepted label for both certain government practices and for a diverse and multidisciplinary domain of academic research, which brings us back to the question, what is it all about?

Almost a decade ago, my colleagues at the Center for Technology in Government (Albany, NY) and I tried to find a concise although complete definition of what we believed that “electronic government” might stand for. Later the Digital Government Society adopted our definition in its 2005 mission statement, and I still consider it the best I know. In this definition, electronic government is about “the use of information and technology to support and improve public policies and government operations, engage citizens, and provide comprehensive and timely government services.”

This definition has the handsome capacity of pointing at areas, for which metrics could conveniently be established to measure success, for example, “improve public policies and government operations.” While the area of public policy may present a more difficult proposition for establishing measurable progress, it appears much more straightforward to measure the improvement of internal government operations by means of information technology. Just like in the private sector the elapsed time for completing a transaction can be monitored and measured. In fact, many improvements hidden from public view have occurred in internal government operations since the advent of electronic government. In one of my research projects on the introduction of new methods in government field operations incorporating mobile information and communication technologies (ICTs), we were able to measure field crew productivity increases of up to 400 percent. These gains, albeit invisible to the public, had a great
impact on the effectiveness of internal government operations. If productivity increases had been the only measure, this e-government project would have been highly successful. And, of course, similar measures could be established and metered for effectiveness, efficiency, cost savings, time savings, or return on investment, which numerous government agencies actually do.

In a similar vein, the comprehensive and timely provision of government services to businesses and services can be measured, for example, by the number of transactions completed, the number of citizens served online, average start-to-finish times, or the average wait times, if any. Some municipalities, like the City of Bellevue in Washington State, conduct annual citizen satisfaction surveys, by which they measure citizens and businesses’ degrees of satisfaction with the City’s online services. In the case of Bellevue, service satisfaction rates consistently range in the upper 80 percentage points, which can be seen as a remarkable accomplishment and an electronic government success story given that online transaction now represent over 60 percent of total transactions. In both cases, internal government operations and external service provisions, straightforward metrics could be and were established and recorded to establish e-government success rates. From this perspective it would be easy to declare victory and electronic government a great success.

However, like with public policy improvements, engaging citizens is seemingly a more difficult task to measure. Although ICTs have demonstrated their utility in reaching out to and engaging citizens, for example, via social media, it is not clear what a meaningful measure would be and how to constitute success: the number of “likes” or “dislikes” to government Facebook postings, the number of retweets of government tweets, the number of “views” of Youtube videos, the number of datasets in ~data.gov, or, the number of citizen comments or petitions, for example? In fact, during extreme events such as the recent Christchurch, New Zealand earthquakes or superstorm Sandy that hit the US East Coast, government responders and social-media savvy citizens actively engaged in ad-hoc collaborations by exchanging and co-producing information services, which benefitted responders and affected communities alike. Such collaborations would not have been possible only a decade ago, and besides capable ICTs they required the mindsets and capacities for effective engagement and collaboration on both sides, which in many cases they did.

The true potential of electronic government with regard to more direct participation in governing and public decision-making on part of citizens is not yet completely understood in my view. So, the determination of meaningful measures of e-government success or failure with regard to citizen engagement needs some more consideration. This may lead to a wider debate on the role of the citizenry and its model of democratic self-governance in cybertimes. While in the 18th century the geographical and temporal distance of constituencies to the locus of public decision making necessitated a model of representation (which we proudly call the Western model of representative democracy), we can now bridge these geographies and time zones in nanoseconds. Yet, the representative democracy model also embraced the idea of electing experts capable in advancing and orchestrating public decision making. The wonderful new element that electronic government has brought us is the potential of transparency via open data and open government for scrutinizing public decisions and for assessing the decisions of elected representatives in an informed fashion.

More than half a decade ago my honorable colleague Don Norris and I engaged in a public debate about the transformational capacity of electronic government. While Don was of the opinion that technology would not make any difference in the business of government, and maybe not even add to productivity
and efficiency, I was not that pessimistic. I agreed with Don (and still do) that ICTs per se would, of course, not make much of a difference; however, I argued that once a critical mass of incremental steps had been taken, one would see a major impact more clearly and more directly. I believe that now a critical mass has been reached with electronic government, at least in the United States, and maybe in some other leading countries such as South Korea, Denmark, Sweden, Singapore, and the United Kingdom to name a few. Back then I asked Don, what would happen today if government communications were reduced to the telegraph like during the Civil War, that is, to pre-telephone times. Yes, we would still enjoy the same representative model of democracy, as we will I believe in the times to come. But without the telephone, the business of government would have come to a standstill already in the first half of the 20th century. I claim that if we today removed at once all ICT-related (e-government)-dependent modes, the business of government would come to a crushing halt with no easy recovery. I call this the elimination test. Imagine also, for example, the trade of securities without computer networks. Did this ICT-based advance transform the nature of the business? Undoubtedly, yes. Did it change the principles of security trading? Not necessarily, and in most cases probably not. Economists refer to costs that you have to incur in order to stay in business as opportunity costs. At the very least, the cost of electronic government have to be seen as the opportunity cost for running the business of government in the 21st century. So, without hesitation, I believe, we can declare electronic government a success.

Bill Schrier, the former CTO of the City of Seattle, an acclaimed world leader in local electronic government, told me in a personal conversation a while ago that it was by means of smart ICT use in government, that is, electronic government, that the City was able to stem several budget crises, contain cost, and at the same time offer novel services, and to do more with less. Again, this is not a bad way of describing the practical success of electronic government.

However, electronic government is successful also in other ways, which need our attention as academics, albeit these are side effects or undesired outcomes. In my studies of interoperability and interoperation in government, I observed the connecting of data and information sources, which under the principle of division of powers and built-in checks and balances, should not be joined, at least not without the explicit consent of the various constituencies. So, the success of electronic government might have some consequences, which we did not intend or foresee. As academics we need to turn our attention also toward these effects, not only the bright side.

That notwithstanding, as the contributions in this book impressively demonstrate, the positive effects of electronic government are enormous, very tangible, visible, and irreversible. This volume is one of the few that take a worldwide approach and not just the perspective of a single region or country for that matter. The contributions encompass empirical as well as conceptual work; they also balance quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method approaches. The regional breakdown of contribution with almost equal representation of Asia/Africa, the Americas, and Europe showcase that electronic government and its impacts are truly worldwide phenomena.

Besides its global coverage and balanced approach in representing the various scholarly approaches in the study domain of electronic government, the editor and publisher succeeded in attracting contributions from quite a number of highly prolific and influential scholars in the domain.
In this way, the book represents a milestone in current electronic government research. It greatly complements and updates previous textbooks, monographs, and edited books in the study domain. I am sure that readers interested in recent insights in electronic government research will as much appreciate the material presented in this volume as I do.

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