E-Government has become a major concern for many nations around the world over the last two decades or so. The ability to use Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is considered by many policy makers as part of “the indispensable grammar of modern life” and a fundamental aspect of citizenship in the ever-expanding information society (Wills, 1999, p. 10). In adopting an E-Government philosophy or framework, every government proclaims an intention to be inclusive and equitable in providing e-services to its public. The reality, however, is far from being inclusive or equitable. The emergence of digital exclusion alongside broader discussions about social exclusion and inclusion entered the political discourse during the 1990s (Selwyn, 2002) with debates around the “information have” and “information have-nots” (Wresch, 1996), “information and communication poverty” (Belnaves, et al., 1991) and the “digital dive” (Jurich, 2000; Parker, 2000). Segments of populations are excluded from the use of and benefits from E-Government services for a variety of reasons. This book aims to provide a broad overview of the issues and practices relating to social inclusion and exclusion in the context of E-Government.

The powering up of grassroots organizations and local citizenry has been an enduring though not always an intended aspect of what is called the “ICT revolution,” the transformation brought about by Information and Communication Technology (ICT). In the past, the public’s participation in politics and governance was often confined to electing officials and leaving it to them to do what is best for the country until the next election. The contemporary political landscape in many countries is very different: it has become a two-way street whereby communication and consultation between the electorate and the elected is an ongoing and interactive process. The desire and demand of citizens to provide feedback to those who are elected and their expectation of a far more efficient and effective government have grown extensively. The quiet revolution that is leading this transformation of government systems is Electronic-Government or E-Government as it is popularly known.

E-Government refers to the use of ICTs such as the Internet and mobile phone as a platform for exchanging information, providing services, and transacting with citizens, businesses, and others. The more common type of model focuses on providing easy access to citizen-centered services and generating efficiencies in government administration. However, it is widely acknowledged that a mature and robust E-Government is not simply technologizing the business of government. Rather, it is about government harnessing ICT to redefine its role in order to remain relevant in a more participative, more interactive, and more informational era. Moreover, as noted by advocates of E-Government, developing a successful E-Government sector is associated with a range of beneficial outcomes including the potential to foster strong and robust political debate, enhanced civil society, and strengthened relations between citizens and government.
Following the increasing rollout of E-Government programs, there has been a commensurate increase in academic debate and research focusing on a range of aspects of E-Government. While those on the supply side have focused on issues of the supposed cost savings, increased efficiency, and enhanced public face of government, the consumer’s point of view has tended to focus on the impacts across a spectrum of social areas.

From a social inclusion paradigm, it is the question of accessibility that ranks high. Accessibility issues relate not only to the degree to which the required hardware is available across society but also the extent to which potential users have the capability to access, understand, and take advantage of online content and services. This relates to the widely discussed digital divide and implications of the imbalance between digital-haves and digital-have-nots. Interest in the digital divide grew in prominence during the mid-1990s, and today it remains an important component of public policy debate and encompasses a range of social, economic, and political factors. As Phipps (2000, p. 41) argues:

A risk is acknowledged that ICT developments may reinforce polarisation and create additional division through people and communities who are information rich or information poor, whereby the failure to get plugged in leads to a downward spiral of economic activity with associated social fall-outs.

Often, discussion about the digital divide concentrates on the interaction between individuals, technology, and society, and tends to present a technological determinist argument. From this point of view, the assumption is that once on-line, the content is readily and easily available to anyone, and everyone benefits from the system. However, experience shows that there is tremendous difference between individuals, even between groups, in how the online content is actually utilized for their own benefit.

For a start, the provision of a basic level of telecommunications infrastructure is an imperative in the E-Government process as inadequate provision may well hinder the widespread utilization of E-Government services. However, the infrastructure is merely a pathway but not the destination. The success of E-Government will depend more significantly on the extent to which online content is current, relevant, and beneficial. Potential users will be turned away if online content does not meet their needs and if information is frequently out of date. On the other hand, if the content is too difficult to be utilized by the less educated and the less tech-savvy segments of the population, that too will widen the digital divide. Thus, social inclusion and exclusion sometimes become an unintended consequence of E-Government (Van Den Berg, et al., 2006; Selwyn, 2002).

This book attempts to examine the theoretical underpinnings of the E-Government practice and to analyze the actual practice through specific case studies in different political, social, and economic environments. It aims to make a contribution to the growing literature dealing with the development of E-Government and its broad social implications by considering evidence from an international collection of research.

As has often been demonstrated in the past, what works in one country may not necessarily work in another. Nevertheless, these international experiences hold lessons on the success and failure of E-Government that may have application beyond one’s own borders. At the minimum, this book intends to add knowledge and empirical evidence on certain aspects of social inclusion and exclusion in the implementation of E-Government. It is hoped that scholars as well as policy makers and program managers will benefit from the offerings in this book so that deficiencies and inefficiencies in E-Government could be better addressed in the future.
ORGANISATION OF THIS BOOK

This book is organised as follows. In section one we present 10 chapters that focus on various issues and concepts associated with e-governance and social inclusion. The chapters provide both useful and interesting frameworks and conceptual discussions surrounding the issues of e-governance and social inclusion, together with empirical applications where relevant. With the goal of clarifying and distilling many of the key concepts presented, Chapter 1 by Arun Mahizhnan presents a short overview of the key concepts dealt with in the book, while chapters 2 through 10 present different approaches to dealing with these concepts. Chapter 2 by Frank Bannister and Denise Leahy (“Different Divisions: A Taxonomy and Examination of the Role of E-Government in the Digital Divide”) deals with issues around the ideals of e-government programs and in particular asks, What are the implications of the digital divide for e-government policy? In order to do this, the authors propose a five-way classifying framework or typology for thinking about the digital divide within society. The typology focuses on structural issues, demographic issues, educational issues, economic issues, and physiological issues, and then relates this back to e-government. They then use the taxonomy to explore how e-government policy and practice need to be adapted to deal with the problem such a divide presents.

In Chapter 3 (“Democratising E-Democracy: A Roadmap for Impact”), Francesco Molinari, Maggie McPherson, and Gurmit Singh discuss the concepts around e-democracy and in particular the conflict that occurs between the ideal of e-democracy and practice. In this chapter, the authors present a roadmap to help articulate the important facets of e-democracy and provide an example for government officials and policymakers engaging in critical participatory dialogues, which encompass civil society, political and computer science researchers, and e-democracy activists for transformation. In this way, the authors aim to define the conceptual borders that surround the concept of e-democracy in order to make room for equity, transparency, and social justice goals alongside the more controversial evidence collection on provisions for institutional change within contingent socio-political settings.

Chapter 4 by Sylvia Archmann and Astrid Guiffart (“ICT: Obstacle or Enabler for Social Inclusion? The Impacts of New Technologies on Governance”) analyses how Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can be used by governments to involve all citizens in social life through increased access to education, employment, public services, as well as participating in decision-making. They provide a discussion of the multiple dimensions of exclusion in relation to ICT and discuss the issues surrounding the development appropriate policies and strategies.

Chapter 5, “Towards Digital Inclusion: Digital Divides and New Media Literacies,” by Giuseppe Anzera and Francesca Comunello introduces a multilevel model for analyzing digital divides with a focus on new media literacy. The model presented considers not only mere technology availability but also real access, advanced reception practices, technical skills, content production, and networking skills. The chapter also reviews some empirical methods for studying the digital divide, trying to underline how a more nuanced framework for analysing the digital divide can be adopted by empirical research.

In the chapter titled “Technological Features and the Structuring of Political Participation: A Lens for Investigating Social Inclusion and E-Governance (Chapter 6),” Vassilis Meneklis develops a theoretical lens based on the structuration theory for the analysis and investigation of social inclusion and its relationship to e-Governance. The chapter identifies the major dimensions of the context of social inclusion and construes them by using ideas and concepts from Structuration Theory and considers implications for research on social inclusion in e-Governance.
In Chapter 7 (“Democratic Potentials of UN Climate Change Conference Host Government Websites”), Catherine Candano uses the example of UN climate change conference Websites to investigate and explore the relational underpinnings between states and citizens. The chapter provides a multilevel approach with which to analyse the democratic potential of Websites and demonstrates its usefulness with a practical example.

Chapter 8 (“Local Government as a Democracy Actor or a Service Delivery Actor: The Supporting Roles for E-Governance Initiatives”) by Peter Demediuk, Stephen Burgess, and Rolf Solli moves the discussion to the local government level and argues that the clearer a local government is about the nature and degree to which it needs to act as a democracy actor and/or a service delivery actor, the greater the prospect that it can choose appropriate electronic means to meet those ends. In elaborating on this issue, the chapter provides models that articulate the elements that constitute better decision-making, better citizens, and better government, and presents examples from five local governments of how electronic means can satisfy particular ends.

In “E-Government in the OECD: A Comparative Geographic Analysis” (Chapter 9), Barney Warf argues that the literature on e-government often assumes that there exists one suitable model that can be adopted in all contexts and elaborates on this thought by emphasising the constitutive role of political and institutional context in the design, implementation, and impacts of e-government initiatives, the understanding of which require a geographically specific analysis. The chapter presents an empirical synopses of how e-government varies among and within OECD countries, emphasizing that the impacts are always culturally and politically mediated, and points to the role of the digital divide in shaping citizen access to e-government, re-enforcing existing social inequalities and enhancing the access of already information-privileged groups to the levers of state power.

The final chapter in section 1 is by Anne Daly, Cathy Honge Gong, Anni Dugdale, and Annie Abello and presents discussion around the issue of social inclusion and children in the digital age. The authors make the case that “a digital divide among children has important implications for e-governance” and argue that the consequence of the lack of opportunities to develop the skills necessary to function in a digital environment “may hinder the transition from school to work and restrict opportunities to actively participate in society as an adult, not only in the economic sphere but more widely.” The chapter provides an interesting empirical example focusing on the spatial distribution of Internet access difficulties across Australia.

In section 2, we present several case studies dealing with the development of e-government platforms and infrastructure and the relationship to questions of social inclusion. These case studies represent examples focusing on a number of different issues from the architecture of e-government, question of the digital divide to examples of online content, and novel approaches to providing access to e-government services. In Chapter 11, focusing on the development of e-government in Australia (“Australia.gov.au: Development, Access and Use of E-Government”), Scott Baum considers how the government’s australia.gov.au Website has been developed through several iterations on the back of deliberate policy development. The chapter notes how the government’s online portal has developed from a simple information provision vehicle to a more inclusive example of information provision, sharing, and feedback. Despite this, and in the face of consistently being placed as one of the most advanced e-government nations worldwide, Baum argues that several hurdles remain in terms of full public participation through the government portal in lauding the emergence of a digital divide among some of the population.
In Chapter 12 (“Social Inclusion and Ombudsoffice Websites in Canada”), Stewart Hyson provides a different case study example by considering the development of Ombudsman’s office Websites in Canada. Arguing that the online environment can allow public sector organisations such as Ombudsman to broaden their scope by becoming more inclusive and, hence, better serve the populace, Hyson takes a user’s approach to examine several key Websites. Noting several mythological issues in analysing the particular case of Ombudsman Websites (i.e. the need for confidentiality), Hyson provides illustrations of the increasing inclusiveness and reach of these Websites with serious efforts to address access for groups such as veterans, different language groups, seniors, and youths.

The work by Paul Burton and Stephen Hilton in Chapter 13 (“To Participation and Beyond? Developing E-Democracy in Bristol, UK”) considers the development of a local program of e-democracy activities in the UK city of Bristol. The chapter outlines how, since early 2000s, the Bristol City Council began developing its e-government (e-democracy) potential beginning with the coordination of its own consultation activities, then encouraging greater participation in council-led activities and supporting grassroots engagement activities. Importantly, the authors note the success of the Bristol project both locally in terms of encouraging greater e-democracy but also nationally by becoming an important best-case example. The chapter uses the evaluation of the Bristol case to highlight the enduring challenges of trying to broaden the scope and effectiveness of local democracy and improving social inclusion outcomes.

Moving to Asia, Chapter 14 (“Government-With-You: E-Government in Singapore”) by Scott Baum and Arun Mahizhnan present a case study of the Republic of Singapore. The chapter focuses on the fact that over the past decade the Singapore government has constantly developed and re-invented its online presence. However, despite significant progress towards full e-government maturity as reflected in the ongoing development of its e-government agenda, some issues of full public participation remain. It is these issues that this chapter discusses. In particular, it considers the ways in which a digital divide within the Singapore model has emerged, despite specific policies to address such a problem.

In the Indian case study provided by Subhash Bhatnagar (“Strategies for Digital Inclusion: Experience from India”), a case is made that in order to reduce the incidence of social exclusion, especially in underdeveloped rural localities, policy needs to consider the context-specific issues that may be relevant to particular situations. While the provision of ICT Kiosks in rural and remote areas have been the preferred option, they do not also lead to desirable outcomes due to poor electricity and telecommunications infrastructure, often resulting in only short-lived success. Noting this, Bhatnagar presents the case of programs utilising ICT infrastructure to deliver services and information in different ways including the use of mobile banking to pay government pensions to those in disadvantaged rural areas and the use of a context-specific application that allows farmers to more efficiently obtain information and reduce the inefficiencies associated with the use of several intermediaries in the market process. Importantly, the chapter illustrates the breakthroughs that can be made by applying more context-specific solutions to problems.

In Chapter 16 (“E-Governance and Social Inclusion: Community E-Centers in the Philippines”), Francisco Magno presents a case study from a Philippines perspective focusing on the development of local community e-centers. Developed as part of the pilot multi-purpose community centers program in the late 1990s and expanded as part of Philippine Development Plans, the centers were envisaged as local entry points for residents to access information and services, especially in rural areas of the country. The case study touches on the problems when content lags behind the provision of hard infrastructure, a problem associated with many e-government projects, especially in less-developed countries.
The chapter from South Korea by Seang-Tae Kim (Chapter 17) takes a comprehensive conceptual framework focusing on supply side, demand side, and policy factors to understand the issue of the digital divide in the country. Tracking the development of the country’s ICT infrastructure, including both hard infrastructure and soft infrastructure, the chapter notes how South Korea has developed from a country lagging behind in ICT infrastructure and literacy (i.e. Internet take up and usage rates) to become one of the world leaders, a fact heightened by its consistently high rankings in global ICT surveys. The aggregate success of the country’s ICT performance masks issues of the digital divide and questions of social inclusion, and these points are taken up with reference to several case studies including the rollout of high-speed Internet to rural areas, ensuring a high level of ICT literacy across the population and improving Web accessibility to vulnerable groups such as the disabled and elderly. The chapter concludes by noting that although steps have been made in terms of reducing the digital divide, the continual advent of new technologies and the increasing use of mobile technologies such as smartphones will continue to raise issues surrounding the digital divide and social inclusion.

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REFERENCES


