

Preface

OVERVIEW

The digital world has altered the way all of us gain access to information, education, and entertainment; conduct business and personal interactions and transactions; and either engage in or withdraw from the world around us. The central focus of this collection of individually written chapters is on governmental websites as they facilitate or fail to facilitate these communications and interactions objectives. In addition to providing selected information about the state of affairs, the chapters provide special insights about strategic models and ideas that might guide future efforts and refinements.

This book has been put together at a time of great potential transition. The actual printed version is an artifact of old technology that will probably be replaced by electronic based media or some mode yet to be developed. Despite this one foot in the past element, the book was put together using the digital advantages of the world. The interaction among the editors was largely conducted in a variety of electronic ways, the individual authors were initially solicited electronically, and all chapters were written and reviewed using electronic means of communications and transmission. The final product is a traditional printed volume that will be handled and read in a manner that has changed little over almost six centuries. Despite this anomaly, the content of the book is focused on what is an emerging field of study and certainly a focus of a reasonable amount of time and resources in many governmental entities—websites.

Websites provide the electronic entry to governmental information and transactions worldwide. The degree of sophistication and the utility of individual websites vary but the way forward is clearly premised on continuing substantial investment. Evidence suggests that individual participants in the business world have been quick to adapt to using the digital world effectively or risk being left behind to falter. Governments at all levels have experienced similar pressures to adopt more aggressively the potential presented by the digital world. The website provides a view of the “face” of many of these efforts associated with taking advantage of the possibilities created by a digital era. Much of the energy associated with developing E-Government has been in what might be defined as “product development.” Issues such as appropriate content and protocols have dominated much of the thinking. The considerations also include the assumption of a linear sequential development progression from posting of static information to more interactive features. To a large extent, the movement seems to have reached a level of development where further interaction and transactions seems possible but has not been achieved. Some of the difficulty associated with further development is the lack of a full understanding about the current state of affairs. In addition, there is a lack of vision concerning appropriate future models. This book is intended to deal with both of these problems, providing additional insights about the nature of things in various

parts of the current E-Government world plus provide some glimpses about what is possible in the future E-Government world. The chapters that make up the book incorporate a combination of thinking about basic concepts that will guide future development of governmental websites, descriptive research about the state of E-Government in various parts of the world, and specific prescription about future direction.

Even a casual glance at most of the literature concerned about E-Government gives the reader ample evidence that most scholars and practitioners are struggling to define a field that is constantly undergoing development and, in many instances, unpredicted change. While many may overrate the potential for E-Government to change the way that governments function, especially with direct interaction with the public served, few deny that computers and information technology have substantially facilitated transactions and enhanced operational efficiency in government. Websites provide the public face of government to the Internet world and have been the focus of much research and investigation. While many of the investigations have been designed to provide basic information about product development, the intent of this book is to look beyond these product development approaches to E-Government and examine emerging trends and strategies in website development.

WHERE THE BOOK FITS INTO THE WORLD

The implicit assumption behind most E-Government websites seems to be “build it and they will come.” This is a quote from the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams* where a mid-western farmer, transformed a corn field into a baseball park that magically attracted players from the past and fans from around the country. Despite the rapid increase in the number of E-Government websites, there is some disappointment that fundamental transformations have not occurred in public-government interactions. While it is true that market values have been enhanced shifting some transactions from “face-to-face” to Internet based, evidence does support the notion that political value is underdeveloped. The chapters in this book provide some additional clues about the direction forward to achieve even greater value from websites and assist the continuing transformation of governmental interaction with citizens.

Much of the development of the Internet and E-Government has been focused on the developed world, especially the United States. This text extends the analysis to the developing world with a number of contributions from authors in South Asia and Turkey. These chapters examine international developments which provide a helpful and unique comparative perspective.

Putting together a book like this always involves a measure of risk—the risk that chapters produced will not be of sufficient quality and a risk that there is little coherence among the various chapters written independently. The editors of this volume were fortunate to have avoided both of these risks. The quality of individual submissions has been high and patterns emerged early in the review process indicating that the chapters could be organized into three foundational issues, each focusing on a different aspect of E-Government websites.

The first focus is on concepts or theories that seem to or should influence and guide E-Government and website development. The chapters that fit into this focus provide insights on several key values and concepts that need to be uppermost in the minds of website developers. These include market and political value, citizen-centric values, language and cultural accessibility, ethical considerations, and social equity.

The second focus is on describing and analyzing E-Government website experience from different national perspectives. This provides a refreshing comparative perspective with indications that the less

developed countries of the world have invested in E-Government as a hope for enhancing governmental development.

The third focus is on some possible models that might provide additional direction for future E-Government development. Insights are provided about the future use of E-Government websites in Web 2.0 applications, incorporation of XML features, and enhancing transparency in a variety of applications.

TARGET AUDIENCE

This book is designed for an academic audience of scholars who are engaged in the study of E-Government, both students and professors. At the same time the book treats issues, concepts, and examples that practitioners in government will find helpful. The chapters are written from a variety of cultural backgrounds, involving several nation-states across the globe, and thus provide some comparative perspective which will appeal to a global audience.

PROGRESSION OF THE BOOK

The first section of the book assembles those chapters which provide a special concept or theory to guide E-Government website development. It is appropriate that this section begins with a chapter written by Ed Downey. In this introductory chapter Downey provides an overview framework for considering E-Government websites as they contribute to market and political value. This introductory chapter is followed by F. Dianne Lux Wigand who provides a framework for citizen-centric websites. In this chapter Wigand argues that a framework that incorporates interaction between end-user, task and channel is important. J. Scott McDonald, Gerald A. Merwin, Jr., and Keith A. Merwin examine the important ingredient of language in websites. The central concern is that E-Government websites need to be sensitive to the possibilities of multiple language competence among intended users and the need to be accommodating of different perspectives in order to minimize accessibility problems. Rodney Erakovich adds the consideration of ethical influences in E-Government website development. Erakovich is especially sensitive to the possibilities that technology can result in value shifts in power distributions, social equity and persuasiveness. Meena Chary provides a final consideration that has frequently been cited as the “digital divide.” While Chary is writing with India in mind, the considerations she poses resonate in all democratic systems in the world.

The second section of the book contains chapters which use primarily descriptive analysis to provide some understanding of the current state of E-Government websites. Abebe Rorissa, Dawit Demissie, and Mohammed Gharawi provide a good summary examination of government websites in Asia. Their findings suggest that many nation-states in this part of the world have begun investment in E-Government with varying results. Aklaque Haque picks up this theme providing a glimpse at E-Government websites in Bangladesh. He documents the need for greater partnership with civil society organizations and the need to adapt to accessible technology, especially mobile telephones. Debjani Bhattacharya, Umesh Gulla, and M. P. Gupta extend the analysis of South Asia with a consideration of websites in sub-national governments in India. They conclude that E-Government development is progressing in most jurisdictions although functionality varies. Asim Balci and Tunc Durmus Medeni provide a look at E-Government websites in Turkey. Franz Foltz, Rudy Puglise and Paul Ferber turn the attention to the

United States with an examination of the recently developed Recovery.gov website at the national level and related state government websites suggesting that these efforts have met significant challenges and overpromised results that have yet to be realized. J. Ramon Gil-Garcia and Francisco R. Hernandez-Tella examine the case of the public-private partnership that was used to develop the State of Indiana website. Matthew A. Jones and Melchor C. de Guzman explore the case of E-Policing among police officers serving municipalities in the United States. Stephen K. Aikins examines the connection between municipal websites and city officials' beliefs and funding for Internet-based citizen participation in five Midwestern states.

The final section of the book contains chapters that begin to provide some templates or ideas concerning the way forward. Dementros Sarantas and Dimitris Askounis discuss the need for standardized frameworks for E-Government portals and propose a National Standardization Framework for Electronic Government Service Portals. Heasun Chun and Daejoong Kim provide a carefully developed framework for improving the value of government websites by implementing Web 2.0 technologies. J. Ramon Gil-Garcia, Jim Costello, Donna Canestraro, and Derek Werthmuller discuss the use of Extensible Markup Language (XML) to assist website content management in governmental settings. M. Erita Joaquin and Thomas J. Greitens turn to the use of budgetary information in governmental websites to enhance citizen participation and presentation of budgetary outcomes. Charles E. Menifield and Joy Clay develop a model for transparency in websites and then use this model to assess the transparency of five state lottery websites. Kenneth A. Klase and Michael John Dougherty examine state legislative websites and their usefulness in providing information to citizens about state budget deliberations in state legislatures, concluding that the evidence about success is mixed.

These chapters provide a wide ranging examination of issues and concepts, descriptions of developments in E-Government websites in various parts of the world, and some limited prescriptions about how to move the developments forward.

Some observations:

- Progress is occurring although there seems to be an expectation that since E-Government involves computers, the pace of change should be much faster. There is an abiding impatience and expectation that results should be greater than is obvious.
- While everyone talks about interactive web developments, there is little evidence that this is taking place on E-Government websites. This necessitates even more effort directed at developing a clear vision. The expectation is that citizens want a greater connection to governmental activity. Such an assumption belies the actual data on citizen participation available on E-Government websites.
- It is possible that interaction is not really desired. Some decry the absence of effective channels and suggest that government is resistant to citizen involvement. Closer examination indicates that at least some of these critics are confusing access with control. Vincent Homburg even suggests that the focus on electronic service delivery may paradoxically widen the gap between citizens and public administrators. (Homburg, 2008)
- The research agenda seems to be overly focused on the issue of why policy makers have not invested more resources in website development. This is the argument that, "build it and they will come." There are plenty of opportunities for access to information--if anything an overload. Consider the number of local governmental jurisdictions a citizen lives in (county, local, school district, and special districts), and assume that each had a well structured website. How many times would even a conscientious citizen be likely to access each? Most of the readers of this volume are actively

involved in public policy (informed observers) but do all have time to fully access all relevant information? Most of us simply do not have the time to spend keeping up with original sources and instead, rely on intermediary sources like the press and perhaps social media like Twitter and Facebook to keep us informed. Maybe the focus should be how to reduce the number of websites and promote cooperative efforts (one option might be a county portal which links to cities, towns, and villages as well as school districts). Perhaps there is the need to have some research focused on how citizens gain information and how we effectively promote education of citizens on governmental issues.

- On the issue of information overload there is a reciprocal concern from the point of view of government actors. If citizens are provided with more and more sophisticated opportunities for dialogue through E-Government websites there may be serious burdens placed on the response capabilities of government actors. If government responses are inadequate the effect on citizen participation levels could be to diminish them.

The Internet is still relatively new and there is little to suggest that either the technology or those who use it have achieved an optimal fit. Technological and social change will continue as, for example, evidenced by the rise of social media and considerations of how it impacts governance. Staying ahead of this kind of change is problematic, however, learning from it is clearly possible and desirable and that is the underlying goal of this book.

Ed Downey
SUNY College at Brockport, USA

Carl D. Ekstrom
University of Nebraska at Omaha, USA

Matthew A. Jones
Portland State University, USA

REFERENCE

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