Individual and Contextual Determinants of Citizens Use of Government Websites

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ABSTRACT
As government websites emerged as central features of e-government and even as public service delivery, concerns have grown about the digital divide—the separation of society into online and off-line citizens with varying access to this new source of government services and information. Yet, little is known about the characteristics of citizens that use, or do not use, government websites and utilizing data from the 2004 General Social Survey, a nationally representative sample, the authors examine the factors associated with citizens’ use of government websites at this key period in the evolution of the Internet. They consider various personal characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, as well as political attitudes and behavior. Considered also are contextual characteristics, such as region of the country, type of employment and household structure. The results of this study are found further into the article.

Keywords: Citizen Engagement, Digital Divide, E-Government, Service Delivery, User-Centered Approach

INTRODUCTION
Over the past decade, there have been various attempts across all levels of government to incorporate the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), commonly referred to as e-government. E-government was introduced as a tool to improve government efficiency and effectiveness, while simultaneously increasing accountability (Melitski, 2006; Carter & Belanger, 2005; Fountain, 2001). Over the course of time and as the field of e-government has grown and developed, its focus has similarly evolved from description of the various stages of development, then to an assessment of adoption and implementation and next to an analysis of benefits and barriers (Schwester, 2009; Van Nelson et al., 2009; Siefert, 2003; Moon, 2002; Layne & Lee, 2001). Recently there has been a shift in the field as research has focused on how e-government impacts governance, democratic principles and service delivery. In order to fully understand the factors that impact e-government, it becomes essential to develop a clear conceptualization of individual needs, which may be considered a user-centered approach (Morgenson, Meijer, & Thaens, 2009;
A closer examination of an individual’s impetus to visit a government website therefore is vital. Do variables such as income and education impact e-government use, or have these factors been minimized as the digital divide decreases? Has society’s reliance upon technology, forcing people to keep pace with new channels of information delivery, changed the public’s overall perception of technology, subsequently increasing use? Has society’s reliance upon technology, forcing people to keep pace with new channels of information delivery, changed the public’s overall perception of technology, subsequently increasing use? This paper attempts to answer these questions ultimately enhancing our understanding of the user-centered approach to e-government. Thus, the research question this study aims to answer is: What are the factors influencing individuals to use government websites?

This study begins by reviewing the e-government literature to identify potential factors that may affect the propensity for an individual to visit a government website. We then describe the methodology used to answer the research question. Next we examine the findings and discuss their overall significance. We conclude with the implications the results have on future e-government research and public administration in general. A better understanding of the factors that promote and prohibit individual use of government websites can ultimately help public sector organizations improve service delivery and performance.

BACKGROUND

The design of internet portals has primarily focused on informational and transactional e-government applications that view constituents more as customers than active participants in democratic decision making (Moon, 2002). The field of e-government has extensively utilized website content analyses of government portals to assess the level of e-government effectiveness. Although examining the existence of website features associated with content, privacy, service delivery, usability and citizen engagement is vital, this approach does not address the perspectives and behaviors of the citizens for whom the websites are primarily designed. Website assessments neglect an important perspective when adopting, designing and implementing public sector ICTs. Essentially, website evaluations do not fully take into consideration the reasons why individuals are inclined, and perhaps more importantly, disinclined to visit and make use of government websites. It therefore becomes incumbent to examine citizen’s actual behavior in order to increase our understanding of why they rely upon government websites for information. Assessing citizen needs is a different approach that has not typically taken place in studies of e-government. Previous studies have either emphasized a top-down approach emphasizing managerial support (Ebrahim, Irani, & Al Shawi, 2005; Scatolini & Cordella, 2005; Golden, Hughes & Scott, 2003) or have explored the features present on websites through extensive evaluations (Holzer & Kim, 2007; Norris & Moon, 2005; Gant & Gant, 2001). Recently, scholars have begun to advance the study of e-government from a user-centered approach (Leighninger, 2011; Verdegem & Verelye, 2009; Wangpipatwong et al., 2008; Anthopoulos, Siozos, & Tsoukalas, 2007; Dimitrova & Chen, 2006; Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2005). This paper will further that research by using a broad, nationally representative sample of the American adult population.

The study of e-government can be advanced by closer, empirical attention to the characteristics of citizens that distinguish frequent from infrequent users of government websites. Furthermore, an assessment of the characteristics that predict which citizens are most likely to utilize government websites is valuable when government attempts to address the needs of underrepresented citizens with the aim of improving service delivery and citizen participation (Schachtel, 2001). Thus, in this study several individual and contextual determinants of the utilization of government websites are explored using nationally representative survey data. Specifically, we examine personal characteristics and political attitudes.