State of the Art in E-Gov Research: Surveying Conference Publications

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ABSTRACT

This article assesses the maturity of the e-government (e-gov) field by examining the nature of 170 papers published at three major e-gov conferences using a straightforward maturity model. Papers were examined mainly for rigor but, to some extent, also for relevance. It was found that theory generation and theory testing are not frequent, while case stories (no theory, no structured data collection) and product descriptions (no analysis or test) are. Also, claims beyond what is reasonable, given the method used, are frequent. As for relevance, only a few of the cases where theories are either tested or generated concern the role and nature of government and governance; most concern general organizational issues that could well find a place within traditional IS conferences. On the positive side, involvement of various pertinent disciplines appears relevant, and global outreach goes far beyond the Atlantic shores. It is concluded that e-gov conferences need to address quality criteria, both rigor- and relevance-oriented, if e-gov is to develop into a mature research field.

Keywords: digital government; e-government; governance; relevance; rigor

INTRODUCTION

After a few years of rapid growth in the field, it is time to pause and reflect on the state of e-gov (electronic government or electronic governance, henceforth used interchangeably where not explicitly distinguished) research — what is it all about? The e-gov field emerged in the late 1990s as a context within which to share experiences among practitioners but over the past few years it has given rise to several conferences that appear to have more and more scientific content. Also, some specialized journals now are appearing. As the field has grown to considerable size,
questions about both rigor and relevance should be asked.

A scientific field usually is characterized by not just a common object of study but also by a set of theories that can be used to understand the objects of study in the field and by a set of preferred methods and/or general methodological practices and understandings of what to investigate and how. While these usually are not undisputed, they still serve as ingredients of a culture of the field, if not homogeneous, then at least to a large extent shared (King & Lyytinen, 2004). Although the e-gov field certainly is generating an increasing amount of research literature, it appears to run the risk of not achieving maturity for several reasons. As for the object of study, government is made up of a huge number of organizations and processes that often appear quite disparate. It is not necessarily intuitively apparent what a small village in France and the federal U.S. government in Washington D.C. share in terms of process rationalization potential. The fields in which government agencies work also differ considerably, from road construction to social welfare, to schools, to railroads, to defense. E-gov hopes, often claimed by governments, businesses, and researchers alike, range from process rationalization, government integration, and better control to citizen empowerment and better democracy. This situation seems to imply that, when e-gov now is launched as a research field, experts from different fields would take their pet view into some small field of e-gov studies, leading to the field becoming a microcosm containing almost anything there is in research with no overarching discourse framing the field as a whole and, hence, leaving the field lacking both a core and well-defined boundaries.

This article investigates the current state of the art in e-gov research by examining 170 articles published at scientific conferences. To what extent is it already a research field? This would imply more than just showcasing every new example of putting IT into government; it would require, apart from rigorous research, some theories distinguishing it from other fields, such as information systems (IS), and linking research to a discernable field of practice.

The article proceeds as follows: After a general overview of e-gov publication outlets, we briefly discuss the field of e-gov on the basis of its history and some commonly used definitions in order to provide a background against which relevance of research in the field can be assessed. Then, we present the investigation model and procedures. After a relatively thorough presentation of data, we briefly discuss the future of e-gov as a research field as well as that of individual institutions; in particular, conferences, but to some extent also journals and educational institutions.

E-GOV HISTORY

The term e-government (e-gov) emerged in the late 1990s, but, of course, the history of computing in government organizations can be traced back as far as computer history goes. Just like the term e-commerce, the concept of e-government was born out of the Internet boom but is not limited to Internet use or G2C (government-to-citizen) systems for direct use.
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