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 character-
ized 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 meth-
ods and/or general methodological prac-
tices and understandings of what to inves-
tigate and how. While these usually are
not undisputed, they still serve as ingredi-
ents of a culture of the field, if not homog-
enuous, then at least to a large extent shared
(King & Lyytinen, 2004). Although the e-
gov field certainly is generating an increas-
ing amount of research literature, it ap-
ppears to run the risk of not achieving ma-
turity for several reasons. As for the ob-
ject of study, government is made up of a
huge number of organizations and pro-
cesses that often appear quite disparate.
It is not necessarily intuitively apparent
what a small village in France and the fed-
eral 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, ex-
erts 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 ex-
amining 170 articles published at scien-
tific conferences. To what extent is it al-
ready a research field? This would imply
more than just showcasing every new ex-
ample of putting IT into government; it
would require, apart from rigorous re-
search, 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: Af-
fter a general overview of e-gov publica-
tion outlets, we briefly discuss the field of
e-gov on the basis of its history and some
commonly used definitions in order to pro-
vide a background against which rele-
vance of research in the field can be as-
sessed. Then, we present the investiga-
tion model and procedures. After a rela-
tively thorough presentation of data, we
briefly discuss the future of e-gov as a re-
search field as well as that of individual
institutions; in particular, conferences, but
to some extent also journals and educa-
tional 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 (gov-
ernment-to-citizen) systems for direct use

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