The Evolution of Web Governance in the Federal Government

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ABSTRACT

Over the last 10 years, federal agencies have undergone a major transformation in the way they manage programs and internal administration, in their relations with Congress, and in their dealings with clients and citizens. Agencies now work in electronic environments of e-mail, electronic documents and filings, intranets, and the Internet. This article seeks to describe and to account for the emergence of what is now being termed Web governance. Briefly, Web governance is concerned with the control of content and design for agency Web sites. We explore the evolution of the process by which Web governance decisions are being made government-wide and at individual federal agencies. We look to changing patterns of administrative process in order to help account for the emergence of controls, and we find evidence of the importance of networking and of disbursed, self-designing processes.

Keywords: e-government; federal agencies; governance; Internet; self-organizing; Web content

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 10 years, federal agencies have undergone a major transformation in the way they manage their programs and internal administration, in their relations with Congress, and in their dealings with clients and citizens. Rather than operating in a slow, cumbersome paper and briefing-book environment, agencies now work in electronic environments of e-mail,
electronic documents and filings, intranets, and the Internet. This transformation has occurred as a result of e-government laws, agency initiatives, citizen demands, and technology-industry support. But the transformation recently has generated calls for exerting tighter control over the content and management of federal agency Web sites, creating uniform standards for presentation and accessibility, and establishing more centralized procedures for tracking and approving material on the Web sites. These new policy efforts include the creation of more elaborate procedures for approving Web site content in many federal agencies. Since 2002, OMB also has been charged with overseeing the creation and implementation of government-wide standards to guide the look and performance of federal Web sites, and more elaborate procedures for tracking and approving the content of sites are being created at the agency level.

Here, we are concerned with the development of these new governance efforts. How are decisions about the control of Web content decisions being made government-wide and within agencies? What kinds of processes and influences shaped the emerging guidelines and approval procedures at the agency and government-wide levels? How has this governance process been governed? We seek to describe the emergence of what is now being termed Web governance, the authoritative control of content and design for agency Web sites. At stake may be a significant change in how decisions about Web site content are being made and who makes them.

What should we expect the development of Web site governance tools to look like? Decentralized, self-organizing management long has been thought to be the hallmark of high technology enterprises. Since the 1960s, a shift from mechanistic to organic organizational processes has been associated with high technology. Burns (1963) saw in the emerging high technology industrial sector the development of new organizational forms based on continuous task redefinition, flexible network structures, lateral communication, and cooperative problem solving. Current research on the kinds of collaborative work settings and problem solving capacities of intranets and the Internet shows how intranets and the Internet fulfill some of these early ideas about lateral communication and knowledge management (Allcorn, 1997; Scott, 1998). Self-organizing, learning organizations are thought to be fostered by the open, wide dissemination of information made possible with intranets and the Internet. Harvey, Palmer, and Speier (1998) find that intranets are the “supporting information technology infrastructure that is most effective in creating and maintaining ... a learning environment” (p. 341). Research on the evolution of creative, interactive intranets sees them as emerging from the bottom up, in several places simultaneously, rather than in an orderly, centralized process (Scheepers & Rose, 2001).

Our own earlier research shows the promise, still often unfulfilled, of intranets to foster collaborative management and problem solving (2002).

Decisions about intranets and the Internet may reflect new ideas about how