Digital Governance Worldwide:
A Longitudinal Assessment of Municipal Web Sites

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the research findings of a digital governance survey conducted in the fall of 2005. The study replicates a 2003 survey of large municipalities worldwide. This longitudinal assessment, based on the Rutgers-SKKU E-Governance Performance Index, focused on the evaluation of current practices in government, with emphasis on the evaluation of each Web site in terms of digital governance. Specifically, we analyzed security, usability, content of Web sites, the type of online services currently being offered, and citizen response and participation through Web sites established by city governments. Based on the 2005 evaluation of 81 cities, Seoul, New York, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Sydney represent the highest performing cities in digital governance. There were only slight changes in the top five cities when compared to the 2003 study. Moreover, there continues to be a divide in terms of digital governance throughout the world among the 30 developed nations belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and non-OECD member nations.

Keywords: citizen participation; digital democracy; digital divide; e-government; usability

INTRODUCTION

The following research highlights the results of an international survey conducted in the fall of 2005 evaluating the practice of digital governance in large municipalities. A similar study was conducted in 2003 (Holzer & Kim, 2004; Melitski, Holzer, Kim, Kim, & Rho, 2005) which provided one of the most exhaustive studies of municipal e-government ever conducted. The research was replicated two years later through collaboration between the E-Governance Institute at Rutgers, Newark, and the Global E-Policy E-Government Institute at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul. The joint study again produced a
wealth of information that contributes to the growing field of digital government. In particular, we focus on the changes over two years in this longitudinal assessment of municipal Web sites.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

A review of digital governance literature includes numerous areas of research, all highlighting the potential of technology under terms such as: e-government, e-democracy, e-participation, and digital democracy. In particular, the literature below indicates potential for improved government services and online democratic practices. Our survey research evaluates municipal Web sites in these areas, and the data presented reflects the current practice of e-governance throughout the world.

Numerous researchers have highlighted the potential for e-governance. In order for good governance to be achieved, Cloete (2003) argues for an acceptance of technological innovations, suggesting that Internet-based services and other technological service delivery applications will be the only way governments can meet their own service delivery goals. A 2003 survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project attempted to determine how Americans contact government. Their study found that e-government is an increasingly popular tool for Internet users, with a primary purpose of getting information and sending messages to the government (Horrigan, 2004). West (2004) highlights a study of chief information officers, where the respondents felt positive about the capacity for the Internet to transform government, however, argues that e-government “has fallen short of its potential to transform government” in the areas of service delivery and trust in government (16).

E-government initiatives, specifically the Internet, must go beyond the static listing of information to more “intentions-based” design so that citizens can more effectively utilize Web portals (Howard, 2001). Recent advances in e-services include the personalization of government Web pages. Virginia’s “MyGov” allows an individual to format Web pages around their interests from options such as public meeting announcements, interactive government services, legislative sites, local government, local media, public schools, lottery numbers, press releases, state government, and traffic information (Eggers, 2005). These developments in e-services are well intentioned but misdirected, suggests Eggers (2005), because they are under-utilized and rarely involve transactions, adding little to no value for individuals and businesses. Individuals still do not visit government Web sites enough to make services such as personalized Web pages a common locus for e-government initiatives.

Moreover, a relatively new aspect of digital governance, e-democracy, is in reality a concept with a history dating to the 1960’s in which scholars, activists, and politicians were forecasting technological utopias (Bryan, Tsagaroussianou, & Tambini, 1998). The current interest in e-democracy can in part be attributed to the lack of performance in old technologies used for democracy (Shane, 2002). Early discussions of the technology — democracy relationship highlighted the potential of telecommunications, with emphasis on cable television and telephone conferencing (Arterton, 1987, 1988; Becker, 1993; Christopher, 1987; McLean, 1989). However, the focus has now significantly shifted to the Internet.
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