Geographies of e-Government in Europe: European e-Government

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ABSTRACT

Government use of the internet – e-government – varies considerably in its degrees of sophistication. This article explores the spatiality of e-government in Europe. It first situates the topic within wider theorizations of geographies of cyberspace. Second, it reviews e-government and its implications. Third, it turns to the digital divide in Europe. Fourth, it maps national e-government readiness and e-participation scores and correlates them with socio-economic measures. Fifth, it provides several overviews of successful West European e-government programs. It concludes by emphasizing that e-government must be approached geographically in a manner tailored to different national contexts.

KEYWORDS

Cyberspace, Digital Divide, e-Government, Europe, Governance, Internet

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of the internet – now used by 50 percent of the world’s population – has unleashed enormous changes in how the planet’s netizens share information, entertain themselves, and purchase goods and services. The internet has also changed how governments interact with their citizens, i.e., e-government. There are several definitions of e-government (Yildiz, 2007), but all include the use of the internet to deliver information and services online, streamline administrative procedures, and solicit citizen input and participation. In particular, Web 2.0, which allows users to interact with government websites rather than just passively receive information, has expedited this process considerably. The topic has been extensively scrutinized by scholars, including a vast literature in public administration (Rocheleau, 2007 offers a useful summary).

This article examines e-government in Europe (here defined to exclude Turkey and Russia). Its goal is to demonstrate that social and spatial context matters to how states deploy the internet: e-government preparedness, implementation, policies, and effects are highly uneven among (and likely within) European countries. In short, e-government cannot be understood without geography. The argument to demonstrate these objectives proceeds in a series of steps. It begins by embedding the topic of e-government within broader literatures concerning geography and cyberspace. The second part offers an overview of e-government and e-governance. Next, it turns to the digital divide, a particularly important issue in the context of the inequalities pervasive throughout Europe, which are manifested in highly uneven internet penetration rates. The fourth section correlates European countries’ e-government readiness and participation scores with a series of economic measures.
including GDP per capita, percent of population in poverty, the Gini coefficient of income inequality, a widely used measure of income distribution, and the Transparency International index of government corruption. Fifth, it briefly summarizes e-government implementation in numerous countries to illustrate its spatially uneven nature. The conclusion focuses on the factors that lead to successful e-government implementation and refutes the simplistic, apsatial “one-size-fits-all” interpretation.

CONCEPTUALIZING E-GOVERNMENT: GEOGRAPHY AND CYBERSPACE

A cottage industry of geographers has artfully charted the origins and growth of cyberspace, its uneven social and spatial diffusion, and its multiple impacts, ranging from cybercommunities to digital divides to electronic commerce (Kellerman, 2016; Zook, 2005; Warf, 2012). Zook and Graham (2007) note the internet’s “core and periphery” structure, as exemplified by the dominant role played by search engines such as Google, and voice concerns over the privatization of the digital commons. This literature offers a valuable means for spatializing the internet, demonstrating its rootedness in social relations and changing geographic relations of proximity, and serves as a necessary antidote to many prevailing utopian and technocratic interpretations.

The geographical literature on cyberspace has addressed a variety of issues, including the internet and retail trade, or e-tailing (Weltevreden & Atzema, 2006; Fekete, 2015), the impact of race (Crutcher & Zook, 2009), neogeography (Graham, 2009), Digital Earth (Goodchild, 2013), internet gambling (Wilson, 2003), cyberwar (Warf & Fekete, 2015), surveillance and biometrics (Graham & Wood, 2003; Popescu, 2017), and internet censorship (Warf, 2010). This body of work has gone a long way toward demolishing popular myths such as the notion that cyberspace is placeless or that it somehow is immune to the social constraints that pervade everyday life. Rather, it has demonstrated how powerfully the internet is wrapped up in prevailing configurations of power and culture, revealing its deeply political character: social inequalities are inevitably reinscribed in cyberspace.

Despite their efforts to spatialize the internet, geographers, however, have given one topic short shrift: e-government. Warf studied e-government geographically in Latin America (2014) and Asia (2017), but surprisingly there has been no attention paid to the topic in Europe from a spatial perspective. This omission is all the more surprising given that Europe has some of the world’s best developed e-government systems, a gap this paper attempts to fill. There are several fine overviews of e-government on the European continent (e.g., Nixon et al., 2010). Reddick (2010) contains several case studies of countries such as Italy, Spain, Greece, Finland, and those in the Balkans. While these offer excellent perspectives on issues such as e-government’s role in promoting accountability, enhancing organizational change, problem and conflict resolution, and the public’s trust in the state, they pay scant attention to the geography of such issues, that is, the entrenched spatial variability in e-government quality and outcomes.

E-GOVERNMENT TYPES AND IMPACTS

There are many types and degrees of sophistication of e-government, which range from simple one-way provision of information, in which citizens are passive consumers, to more integrated systems that solicit citizen feedback. Three basic forms of e-government exist: government-to-business (G2B), government-to-government (G2G), and government-to-citizens (G2C) (Fountain 2001). G2B e-government includes phenomena such as digital calls for proposals for contracts; submissions of contract bids and bills and electronic payments. G2G e-government enhances interaction among different government offices and agencies. E-government may also encourage a democratization of public bureaucracies by moving them from vertical, hierarchical chains of command to more horizontal, collaborative models (Ho, 2002; Ndou, 2004). The most common types of G2C e-government include: the digital collection of taxes; payment of utility bills, fines, and dues; applications for permits and licenses; online registration of companies and automobiles; registration for public services; and
Concerns Management, E-Government and E-Participation: Experiences and Findings from Germany
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